

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

**CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE
THRESHOLD: AN EXPLORATION OF
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AMONG LAY
MINISTRY STUDENTS**

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: AN EXPLORATION OF
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QUENTIN DAVID CHANDLER

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The context for the project was the researcher's professional context as Principal of the Peterborough Lay Ministry Course (LMC) the Anglican Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for licensed lay ministers. The purpose was to enhance the researcher's professional practice by exploring perceived variance in aptitude or appetite for theological reflection among LMC students.

A pilot study was conducted among a sample of students to test the usefulness of focus group interviews as a qualitative research method to explore the topic. The educational notion of threshold concepts emerged from reflection on the pilot study findings as a lens through which to view blockages in students' practice and understanding of theological reflection. Engagement with literature led to a definition of theological reflection as a mutually critical dialogue between four 'voices': Christian tradition (including the Bible), experience, the self-reflexivity of the reflectors, and their praxis. Working with this definition, focus group interviews were conducted among the students to explore whether threshold concepts could be observed in their practice of theological reflection. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the core tutors on the programme to explore their experience of theological reflection on the LMC and thresholds in its practice. A self-reflexive element involved the researcher in exploring his own negotiation of threshold concepts as the research project progressed.

Five threshold concepts were found relating to the interpreted nature of texts, the complexity of theological reflection, its pervasiveness, attention to the internally held framework or *habitus* of faith, and the spiritual dimension of the reflective dialogue.

The identification of the five threshold concepts in the students' practice is the contribution to knowledge that enhances the researcher's intellectual and professional self-understanding and leads to some proposals about future pedagogy on the LMC. A modest contribution is made to a debate about the characteristics of threshold concepts and their effectiveness as a theory to explain blockages in learning. The researcher's self-reflexivity and negotiation of the spiritual threshold concept are identified as key areas of his own learning.

Key words: theological reflection, liminality, threshold concepts, conversation, *habitus*.

The length of the thesis is 56,468 words.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	vi
Copyright	vii
Prologue – Friday Evening.....	1
Part 1 - Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1 – Research Context	4
Introduction.....	4
My journey with education and theological reflection	5
The Lay Ministry Course (LMC)	8
Boundaries of the Research.....	10
Conversations beyond the threshold.....	12
Chapter 2 – The Pilot Study: Towards a Central Research Question	14
Introduction.....	14
A shift in research paradigm	14
Designing the Pilot Study.....	17
Learning from the pilot study	21
Discovering threshold concepts.....	23
The central research question	25
Linking the pilot with the main study.....	25
A developing methodology	25
Initial research design	27
Part 2 – Conceptual Framework.....	28
Chapter 3 – The Camel and the Eye of the Needle: Exploring Threshold Concepts	28
Introduction to Part 2	28
Reflecting on a biblical image.....	28
Some Characteristics of Threshold Concepts	30
Critiquing and developing threshold concepts.....	37

Conclusion	47
Chapter 4 – Towards a Critical Conversation.....	49
Introduction.....	49
A mutually critical conversation	49
The canonical voice	51
The ethnographic voice	53
The subjective voice.....	55
The praxis voice	56
A threshold concept <i>par excellence</i> ?	60
Conclusion	65
Part 3 – The Fieldwork.....	66
Chapter 5 – Planning the Conversation: Research Design	66
Introduction to Part 3	66
Theological reflection and action research	66
Ethical issues.....	72
The fieldwork.....	75
Data analysis	79
Conclusion	80
Chapter 6 – Listening to the Conversation	81
Introduction.....	81
Reflective interlude	81
Constructing a model	82
The pervasive threshold concept	84
The interpretive threshold concept	89
The Complexifying Threshold Concept	98
Limitations	102
Chapter 7 – A Prayerful Conversation	104
Introduction.....	104
The tutor interviews	104
Reassessing the student data	107

The spiritual threshold concept	108
The subjective threshold concept	111
The final, validating focus group.....	113
Limitations	118
Part 4 – Conclusions	120
Chapter 8 – Further Reflection: Suspending the Conversation.....	120
Introduction.....	120
Taming the Spirit	120
Pauline pneumatology	121
Contemplative prayer and theological reflection.....	123
Conclusion	126
Chapter 9 - Conclusion	127
Introduction.....	127
Threshold concepts as social constructions	127
Characteristics of threshold concepts	128
Using threshold concepts to define theological reflection	130
Threshold concepts and pedagogy on the LMC	130
My journey through the research.....	131
Epilogue – Sunday Afternoon	133
References.....	135
Appendix 1 – Professional Doctorate Paper 1	144
Appendix 2 –Professional Doctorate Paper 2	174
Appendix 3 – Professional Doctorate Paper 3	194
Appendix 4 – Participant Information Sheet	213
Appendix 5 - Participant Consent Form	215
Appendix 6 – Table of participants	217

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 – a simplified version of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle.....	11
Figure 3.1 – developmental stages in conceptual learning learning.....	42
Figure 3.2 – a relational view of the features of threshold concepts.....	44
Figure 3.3 – a model of transitional learning paces.....	47
Figure 6.1 – A conversational model of liminality and learning in theological reflection.....	83
Figure 7.1 – A conversational model of liminality and spirituality in theological reflection....	108

List of Tables

Table 3.1 – Knowledge types, threshold concepts and conceptions of learning.....	40
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Prologue – Friday Evening

It is Friday evening and twenty-nine students in training for Licensed Lay Ministry have gathered with their tutors for a residential weekend. I lead them in an interactive Bible study. Two students are given a length of wool, invited to wind it around their fingers and take part in a tug of war. The wool quickly breaks. I look around the group and they look puzzled as to why I have asked them to do something so silly.

Next I ask the students to stand in a circle. I give one of them a ball of wool, ask her to wind one end around her finger and throw the ball to someone opposite. He in turn is asked to wind the wool around his finger and throw the remainder of the ball to someone else; and so the process continues. I introduce several more brightly but differently coloured balls of wool into the game. Soon balls of wool are thrown to and fro across the room until everyone has two or three strands wrapped around their fingers, and there is a giant cat's cradle connecting the group. There is much laughter and considerable puzzlement.

I ask them all to make sure the wool is stretched taut and then invite them to lean backwards, allowing the wool to take the strain of their full weight. They are hesitant at first; surely the wool will break and they will fall backwards into the chairs behind? But soon they do as I have asked them and the room falls silent save for the odd 'ah' as they come to understand. Not a strand of wool breaks.

Physics was never my strong point. I do not know why this experiment works. Somebody once tried to explain it – something to do with weight distribution – but I was unable to grasp the concept. One day I might cross a threshold that would allow me to understand the phenomenon and then I might be as good at designing suspension bridges as I am at leading interactive Bible studies. For now I have to be content that the game will make a point that will come to poignancy as the evening's teaching reaches its conclusion.

The game over, the students remove the wool from their fingers and complain about what it has done for their blood circulation. The wool falls to the floor in a brightly coloured, tangled mess. My colleagues begin to gather it up but I ask them to leave it where it is; there could be no better visual aid.

We then begin the Bible study proper, looking at Paul's letters to the Corinthians which the students have been asked to read prior to attending the residential. I show PowerPoint slides: a map to locate ancient Corinth, some pictures of its ruins. We are fascinated by the idea of ships

being dragged across the small strip of land to avoid having to sail around the Peloponnese peninsula, and as we look at a slide of a paving slab with the name of the city treasurer Epaphras inscribed on it and wonder whether this might be the same Epaphras that was with Paul in Corinth and sent his greetings to the Christians in Rome (Romans 16.23), we feel we can almost reach out and touch the place.

Then things get more problematic. I attempt to reconstruct the order of events surrounding Paul's visits to Corinth, subsequent fallings-out and the correspondence that went to and fro. The divisiveness among the Corinthians, their immorality, their spiritual arrogance, and their failure to transcend barriers of class even at the breaking of bread appal us as we get into the text. So does Paul's reaction – he seems arrogant and manipulative and all the context-setting in the world cannot excuse his attitude to women. Can this really be the inspired word of God? It seems more like a tangled mess. We look at the wool on the floor.

We move on to another activity. A colleague who has long since crossed thresholds in product design about which I could only possibly ever dream has made us a double-sided jigsaw puzzle just for the occasion. Each piece has a shiny white surface on which it is possible to write with a whiteboard pen. The jigsaw forms a human body. The wooden shape is backed with Perspex and, when the puzzle is complete, another piece of Perspex slides on top so that the body can be held up and both sides can be seen. Each student is given a pen and a piece of puzzle and asked to write on one side what they consider to be one of their strengths and on the other what they consider a weakness.

Some question the instructions. How do they know which side to write the strengths on and which to write the weaknesses on? They have yet to grasp that the whole point of the exercise is that it does not matter. When they have finished writing we put the jigsaw together. Once completed, whichever way round the puzzle is held, it is the shape of a human body made up of the group's strengths and weaknesses. We read the passage in 1 Corinthians 12 in which Paul likens the church to a body, and then sit in silence. The penny drops, a threshold is crossed. After a pause we read 2 Corinthians 12.8-9. This was written by someone whose spiritual arrogance went as far as bragging about being caught up to the third heaven, whatever that means (2 Corinthians 12.1-4). But there was that 'thorn in the flesh' and it is in Paul's weakness that God's power is made perfect.

The study sets the theme for the weekend – teamwork. Tomorrow we will draw on some insights from the business world to deepen our understanding of the topic. Then there will be a teambuilding exercise. The students will be divided into groups of four or five, given boxes,

card, tape and other sundry bits and pieces and asked to design and build a model church. The interactive Bible study has helped us view the landscape differently. Teamwork is not about exerting power and strength but about working together, building on our strengths and weaknesses. The two person tug of war broke the wool while the multi-coloured cat's cradle took the weight of the whole group. The threshold is crossed; the multi-coloured, tangled mess on the floor reminds us that it is in the entanglement of our lives that we encounter God.

Part 1 - Introduction

Chapter 1 – Research Context

Introduction

The way in which the resources of scripture and tradition are used to interpret and provide insight into experience is of the utmost importance for practitioners of Christian ministry. For the teenager struggling to establish his identity in the light of a sexual orientation that he thinks is condemned in scripture the issue is crucial. So it is for the woman who cannot forgive her son-in-law for his adulterous affair or the young couple who grieve for their stillborn baby. It matters to Christians whose professional context requires them to make difficult ethical decisions and to those who must work out how to be the church in a beleaguered rural parish. Life's joys as well as its sorrows and difficulties can be viewed through the lens of scripture and tradition; and those same joys and sorrows have potential to illuminate traditional sources in new ways. So the insights provided also matter when an exam is passed, a new job is started or a sense of vocation is nurtured.

It is the role of the Christian minister to be alongside people in these and myriad other experiences as they seek to make sense of them in the light of their faith. He or she explores where God might be in human experience and seeks to facilitate similar exploration by others. The insights gained inform the way that people think, speak or act in a given context or situation. This process – the bringing together of the sources of tradition with experience in ways that have implications for Christian living or praxis – is described as theological reflection (Kinast, 2000, p.1). Theological reflection is the primary subject matter for my professional doctorate and for this thesis. My interest in it arises from my professional role as Principal of the Lay Ministry Course (LMC), the Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for Licensed Lay Ministry – a role that involves facilitating theological reflection among the LMC's students in preparation for their ministerial practice.

In this opening chapter I begin by locating myself in relation to theological reflection and education. I then set out the context of the LMC and its students, outlining the complexity of the setting in which they are being prepared to minister and engage in theological reflection. I describe how this context led me to identify the general area for my research before setting some boundaries for the project and mapping the remainder of this first part of the thesis.

My journey with education and theological reflection

Childhood experiences of learning

I begin with some autobiographical details that are supplemented by those I gave in my first paper on Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme (see Appendix 1, pp. 143-173). This represents a reflexive turn; a ‘bending-back-on-the-self’ that locates me as a researcher in relation to the project and clarifies why it is that I interpret the realities I explore in the way I do. My own learning is a concern throughout the research; as well as focussing on the theological reflection of the students it also explores how my understanding has developed as the project has progressed.

My discovery of theological reflection as a way of learning from experience in the light of Christian tradition was a liberating experience. My childhood education was difficult. I was one of those children of the 1960s who was taught to read using the experimental Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA). This used its own forty-four character phonemic alphabet and was designed to aid literacy in early years learning (Bell, 2010). I was born at the end of August; this meant I was always the youngest child in my class. The result was that I was unable to read traditional text until I was just short of my eighth birthday. The memory of my sister who is two years older than I am borrowing *Jane Eyre* from the library when I was still confined to Nisbet’s *Janet and John* abides and gives me an empathy with those whose experience of learning is one of frustration.

When I started at a minor public school when I was eleven I lagged badly behind most of my classmates. Whatever progress was made at that establishment was halted two years later when my parents suffered a financial crisis and I moved schools twice in as many years. Unable to match my own or my parents’ expectations I all but gave up, leaving school at sixteen with five GCE ‘O-levels’ to work as an accounts clerk.

The centrality of the Bible

My route back to formal education came as a result of an awakening of Christian faith. The context for this was a church in the Conservative Evangelical tradition of the Church of England. In this context the Bible was of central importance. My increasing biblical knowledge at this stage was significant. I saw scripture as being the source of all ‘truth’ and took solace in the knowledge that I had access to this ‘truth’ when my better educated and more successful friends and family did not. In a way that I explore more fully as I draw towards my conclusions in Chapter 8 (pp. 119-8), this biblicism was accompanied by a flirtation with the Charismatic Renewal and a particular understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting scripture and experience.

The trustworthiness of the Bible was soon to be undermined for me, however. The particular interpretation of it that was pervasive in the youth fellowship that I first attended and then led seemed to be at odds with my experience. Some of my colleagues at work lived in ways that were incompatible with my understanding of a biblical lifestyle and yet the quality of their lives and relationships seemed to equal or surpass that of my own or my friends at church. My wife and I made friends with a gay couple and I found myself bitterly regretting the way a young gay man had been treated in the youth fellowship. Most of all I was acutely aware that neither I nor my Christian friends could even approximate to the biblical lifestyle we espoused.

So I came to something of a crisis. On the one hand I still had great attachment to the scriptures that had formed such a significant part of my own identity. On the other hand what I understood to be the message of those scriptures seemed to stand in sharp contradiction to human experience. I was beginning to understand the problematic nature of correlating traditional sources with experience.

The Aston Training Scheme

At the same time that I was grappling with these issues I began exploring a vocation to ordained ministry. Because of my lack of educational qualifications I was required to do a two year part-time programme of study called the Aston Training Scheme prior to starting theological college. This was where I first encountered theological reflection under the tutelage of the Principal, Laurie Green. Green (2009) introduced students on the programme to his version of the pastoral cycle with its stages of experience, exploration, reflection and action. It proved to be something of a revelation for me. Now I had a way of ‘doing theology’ that took experience seriously and reflected on it in the light of tradition, rather than starting with propositional statements and seeking to apply them to experience.

The Aston Training Scheme made use of an Open University foundation module on the social sciences. This served to provide some analytical tools for the exploration stage of the cycle but it also introduced me to extra-biblical sources for reflection, widening my perspective, instilling a love for learning, and building some academic confidence. At the same time the reflection stage of the cycle drew in insights from Christian tradition so the method did not dispense with the biblical sources that were so important to me. My journey with theological reflection was only just beginning, however, and as it continued it became clear that Green’s pastoral cycle begged as many questions as it answered. Two issues, in particular, kept reasserting themselves.

A confusing conversation: getting to the 'heart of the matter'

The first of these concerned the relative weight given to each stage in the pastoral cycle. What happens when the insights offered by the tools of the social sciences at the exploration stage lead in a different direction from that suggested by scripture or tradition at the reflection stage? Where, ultimately, does authority lie? Whilst studying for a Masters in Pastoral Theology I became aware of Pattison's (1989) 'critical conversation' approach to theological reflection (see Chapter 4 pp. 59-61). By now a decade of experience as a parish priest had made it clear to me that reflection in the midst of ministerial practice rarely followed in the neatly delineated stages of Green's cycle. For this reason Pattison's conception of theological reflection as a three-way critical dialogue between the reflector(s), the tradition and the experience being explored had much to recommend it. I was still left with the problem, however, of which way to jump when the conversation partners disagree. Does the voice of scripture and/or tradition take precedence over that of the reflector(s) and experience? If so had my introduction to theological reflection really got me any further than a more nuanced version of the crude biblicism I had espoused prior to my theological training?

Engagement with further approaches, helpful and insightful as they were, seemed merely to restate the problem. One method, for example, involves seeking to employ 'spiritual wisdom' as a method in theological reflection (Killen and de Beer, 1994). Its proponents advocate the avoidance of two equally problematic positions. The first is one of 'certitude' in which 'the Christian heritage' holds sway at the expense of other sources of insight. The opposite position is 'self-assurance' in which the experience of the reflector(s) obscures what authoritative tradition might have to say. They see the 'movement towards insight' as being facilitated by adopting a position of 'exploration' whereby the 'thoughts, images, and insights that arise from the concrete events of our lives are brought into conversation with the wisdom of the entire Christian community throughout the ages' (Killen and de Beer, 1994, p.18).

In order to facilitate such a conversation Killen and de Beer (1994, pp. 63-66) encourage reflectors to allow the thoughts, feelings and emotions that arise from an experience to lead to an image so that the 'heart of the matter' can be identified. This 'heart of the matter' is then correlated with wisdom from the Christian heritage in a way that leads to insight. Once again, however, there may be disjunction between the insight suggested by the image and that suggested by scripture or tradition. Herein lies the heart of the matter for me. Which voice carries the greater authority? My engagement with Killen and de Beer's method served merely to restate the question.

An acquired taste

The second issue that has continued to assert itself concerns the way individuals relate to the concept of theological reflection. For me it was the key that made academic study and theological exploration accessible. This was clearly not the case for some of my fellow students either on the Aston Training Scheme or at theological college. These colleagues were intelligent and in many cases better qualified than I was; but for some reason or other they did not find Green's approach or other methods in theological reflection helpful. During my time as a parish priest I introduced people to theological reflection in study groups. Some found it an extremely helpful way of exploring everyday issues in the light of faith but others struggled with it or found it mystifying.

As I took on my role with the LMC (I co-wrote the curriculum, I was involved with the programme on a part-time basis from its inception in 2009, and I took over as Principal in 2011) a similar pattern seemed to be evident among its students. A motivating factor for me was the opportunity to provide others with tools for theological study in the way that the Aston Training Scheme had done for me. I saw the facilitation of theological reflection among the students as being a key component in this, so I found it frustrating that once again there seemed to be variance in their aptitude or appetite for its practice. This apparent variance provided the puzzle that I initially brought to my research. Was there some kind of blockage that prevented some students from engaging in theological reflection? If so, what was it, and could anything be done to remove it? Alongside this I had an inchoate suspicion that the key to exploring the issue might be bound up with my earlier concern of how much weight ought to be given to each stage or conversation partner in the process of theological reflection.

The Lay Ministry Course (LMC)

The students

With these initial puzzles in mind I now move on from describing my own walk with theological reflection and education to setting out the context of the LMC and its students. The programme draws its participants from a variety of ecclesial, educational and social backgrounds. The church tradition in which students are rooted may be a factor in determining the importance they attach to different stages in the reflective process. Because its members are drawn from across the spectrum of Anglican traditions the student body mirrors my own uncertainty in this area. Some are rooted in the Evangelical tradition with its emphasis on the importance of the Bible in theological reflection; others are from Anglo-Catholic churches where tradition is of greater significance. Some are from a Liberal background where traditionally there is greater stress on the role reason has to play; others are from Charismatic churches and are used to emphasis being placed on experience of the Holy Spirit in worship.

My chequered experience of schooling also has its corollary in the educational background of the students. One has a Ph.D. in Church History and one is a medical doctor – others left school as teenagers with minimal qualifications and have not engaged in formal education since. Of the thirty-six students studying with the programme when I conducted my research in 2012-13, twenty-two were women and fourteen were men. The eldest participant was in her early seventies and the youngest in his late thirties with the majority being aged between forty and sixty. One of the women was of black African ethnicity and English is her second language. The rest of the students were of white, British ethnicity.

These students come from across the Diocese of Peterborough, an area that is mixed demographically and socially. Geographically, the diocese may be said to occupy a hinterland between East Anglia and the Midlands on its east-west axis and between Lincolnshire and the affluent Home Counties to the north and south respectively. Its identity is difficult to characterize; it spans two government regions and borders two more. Of its two major centres, Northampton and Peterborough, it has been said that the former has the feel of a ‘Midlands town’ while the latter is a ‘Fenland city’ (Diocese of Peterborough, 2013). The population in 2011 was just short of 900,000 of whom 212,000 were living in Northampton. By a quirk of history something over a third of the City of Peterborough is in Ely diocese; at the 2011 census its population was 190,000. Other major towns are Kettering, Corby, Wellingborough, Rushden and Daventry but much of the diocese is made up of small villages in the counties of Northamptonshire, Rutland and a corner of Cambridgeshire known as the Soke of Peterborough (Diocese of Peterborough, 2013).

Much of the diocese might be regarded as affluent but there are pockets of deprivation in some of the villages and in the urban centres. There are minority ethnic communities in Kettering, Northampton, Peterborough and Corby and at the 2011 census the number of people stating that they belonged to faiths other than Christianity varied from 1% in Rutland to 12% in Peterborough (Diocese of Peterborough, 2013).

Structure of the programme

There is further variety in the areas of ministry for which students are prepared. The programme provides training for three distinct Licensed Lay Ministries; those of Reader, Lay Pastoral Minister (LPM) and Licensed Evangelist (LE). In the case of Readers there is a focus on facilitating skills in theological reflection that inform teaching, preaching and liturgical practice; for LPMs the emphasis is on developing skills that will facilitate the interpretation of pastoral encounters; and for LEs theological reflection involves assisting people on the fringes

of the church and beyond to interpret experience. In addition the programme accommodates some students known as ‘Ministry Explorers’. These are people who are exploring the possibility of ordained ministry. For them the programme seeks to nurture theological reflection that crystallizes and articulates a sense of vocation.

The LMC is a part time programme, studied over two years by LPMs and LEs and over three years by Readers. There are three components to the curriculum (further information on the rationale for this is given in my earlier paper in Appendix 1, pp. 149-90). The Core Foundational Module is studied by all students and consists of six study days and two residential weekends over two years. Assessment for this part of the course is by a written reflection after each day or weekend. In addition students study *Living Faith* modules. These cover various areas of the theological curriculum, they are open to be studied by students who are not training for Licensed Lay Ministry, and the emphasis is on academic development. Each consists of six evening sessions followed by an assignment. Finally, students study a module designed for their own specific ministry each year. These consist of placements and other practical tasks.

Boundaries of the Research

The LMC programme

The LMC not only represents the context for my research; it also demarks one of its significant boundaries. The findings (see Chapters 6 and 7, pp. 81-118) are confined to the thirty-six students who were studying on the LMC in the 2012-13 academic year, the six key course tutors for the same year, and the self-reflexive account of my own journey through the research; they are drawn only from the data collected in the pilot study in March 2012, the full study that I carried out between October 2012 and February 2014, and the final, validating focus group that I conducted in May, 2014. For reasons I explore further in Chapter 2 (pp. 14-17), the research and any observations, theories or conclusions that emerge from it are confined to this specific programme, to its students, and to my own learning – they are not generalizable to other similar populations or training programmes.

Theological reflection

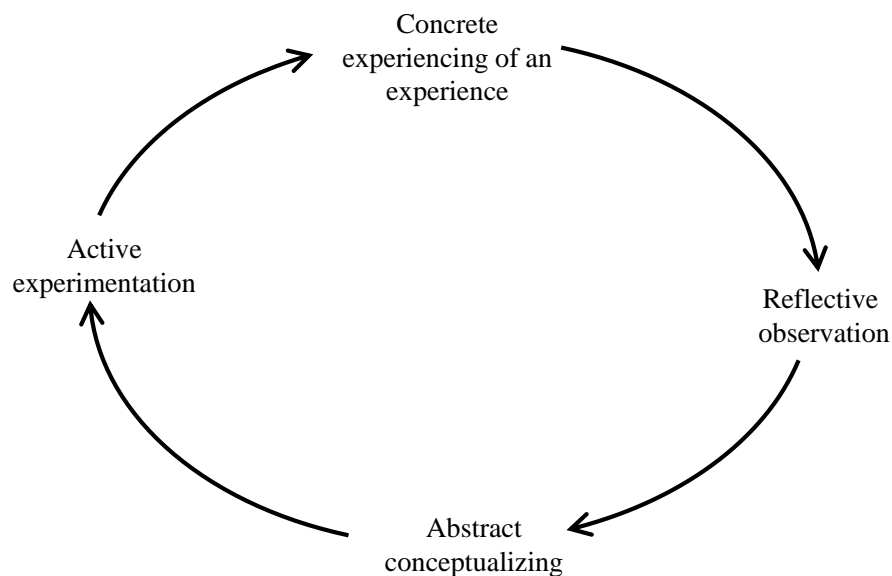
A further set of boundaries is formed by the specific way in which I understand theological reflection. I have suggested above that it involves the bringing together of experience and the sources of tradition in ways that have implications for praxis; but there are other ways in which the term could be understood. ‘Theological’ can be taken in at least two ways. It can either refer to theology as an academic subject or discipline or to a more general discourse about God (Astley, 2002, pp. 52-4). If it is taken in the former sense and used to qualify ‘reflection’ it

suggests a very different concept of theological reflection to the one I have proposed. The term ‘reflection’ could be seen to refer to a mental process within the broader activity of learning. This might be related to deeper learning where there is ‘manipulation of complicated or unstructured ideas’ to produce meaning (Moon, 1999, p. 155). If the two terms thus understood are put together, theological reflection would be that process whereby complicated or unstructured ideas in the academic study of theology are manipulated to produce meaning. Such meaning might then be seen as being available to be applied to experience.

The way in which I use both words in my research is different. My understanding of reflection is more closely related to Kolb’s (1984) concept of experiential learning (Moon, 1999, pp. 24-6) on which Green (2009, pp. 17-18) draws to develop the pastoral cycle that was my introduction to theological reflection (see page 6 of this introduction). Kolb’s experiential learning cycle is reproduced in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 – A simplified version of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle

(Reproduced from Moon, 1999, p. 25)



The starting point is a concrete experience. For LMC students engaging in theological reflection this might be a classroom discussion but it is as likely to be a pastoral encounter, difficult ethical decision or problematic situation. The cycle continues with a stage of ‘reflective observation’. I describe in Chapter 6 (pp. 84-5) how LMC students engage in such ‘reflective observation’ as a careful description helps them to map the experiences on which they reflect. This prepares the concrete experience for the stage of ‘abstract conceptualizing’ that leads to ‘active experimentation’ and thence to a new concrete experience and further

rounds of the cycle. In theological reflection the stages of ‘abstract conceptualizing’ and ‘active experimentation’ involve discerning how, in the light of scripture and tradition, to think, speak or act in the situation under consideration.

This identifies the word ‘theological’ with Christian tradition and makes it much broader than a narrowly conceived idea of theology as an academic subject. Cameron et al. (2010, pp. 53-6) suggest that four theological ‘voices’ inform the life of a church or other Christian organization. These are, first, the church or other organization’s normative theology – its scriptures, creeds and doctrines; second, its formal theology – the work of professional theologians; third its espoused theology – what members of the church or other organization say they believe; and, finally, its operant theology – the way those same members live out their beliefs. Tradition that is correlated with experience and has implications for praxis according to my conception of theological reflection is comprised of all four voices. The complex wrestling involved in its practice is the subject matter for my research.

Conversations beyond the threshold

The puzzle as to why some students seem to take to theological reflection as I have defined it more readily than others was the question that prompted the project. I suspected that an answer would enhance my professional practice and represent an original contribution to knowledge. In the next chapter I recount how I began to engage with the issue as I progressed through Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme and how a pilot study led me to narrow my area of research and eventually to the emergence of a central research question.

I suggested above that the Diocese of Peterborough exists in a kind of hinterland in middle England between several more readily identifiable regions. In view of this there is a certain irony to the direction in which the pilot study took the research. The diocese could be seen to be in a position of ‘liminality’, a term derived from the Latin *limen* (threshold) and referring to a status of being ‘betwixt and between’ or ‘neither here nor there’ (van Gennepe, 1960; Turner 1974; 1997). In Chapter 2 I describe how the pilot study led me to suspect that some students might be in a position of liminality prior to negotiating certain thresholds in their learning (Meyer and Land, 2003; 2006a; 2006b) that would enable them to engage more effectively in theological reflection. It is this suspicion that gave rise to the title for my thesis – it explores whether theological reflection among LMC students can be understood as a dialogue that takes place at or beyond such thresholds.

The emergence of a central research question brought the initial stage of the project to its conclusion. In Chapter 2 I conclude this opening part of the thesis by setting out how I designed

my research to answer my central question before outlining how the rest of the thesis provides an account of the project.

Chapter 2 – The Pilot Study: Towards a Central Research Question

Introduction

In this chapter I narrate how I conducted a pilot study to begin exploring the puzzle about variance in LMC students' aptitude or appetite for theological reflection that I set out in Chapter 1. I originally told the story of the pilot study in the paper reproduced in Appendix 2 (pp. 185-90). What I describe here is a development of that account that has emerged from further reflection. I begin by relating how, in the light of my journey through Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme, I made a paradigmatic shift in my understanding of the research process. This involved moving from a positivist approach with a deductive methodology to a social constructivist approach and an inductive methodology. I describe how this paradigmatic shift prompted me to test in the pilot study whether a method associated with it would be likely to yield knowledge about theological reflection on the LMC; the method concerned was a focus group carried out with a sample of students.

I go on to set out how I planned and carried out the focus group, how I analysed the data, what I learnt from it, and how this led me to formulate a central research question. In the process I identify Meyer and Land's (2003) threshold concepts framework as a lens through which to view theological reflection on the LMC. I describe how, in view of the pilot study findings, I developed my methodological approach to the study further. The chapter concludes with an outline of how I carried out the remainder of the research.

A shift in research paradigm

If my journey with theological reflection as I described it in Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8) had led me to wrestle with the issue of whether the voices of scripture and tradition have precedence over those of the social sciences and experience, then a similar struggle accompanied my journey through Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme. In this case, however, the struggle was not over whether there are truths deposited within the sources of the Christian tradition that can be applied to experience; rather, it was to do with whether or not there might be 'truth' that is 'out there' to be discovered (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 20-30) and applied to the social reality of the LMC. The realization that if such 'truth' is 'out there' at all it is certainly not easily apprehended or applied represented the negotiation of a threshold in my own learning (Meyer and Land, 2003). It led me to see that if the research was to make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge it would need to start by paying careful attention to the way LMC students correlate the sources of their faith with experience and from there begin generating theory.

The papers I produced during Part 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme are reproduced in the first three appendices of this thesis (pp. 143-211) and they bear testimony to the difficulty I had in negotiating this particular threshold in learning. I began in Paper 1 by exploring a variety of literature to see if I could find a theoretical explanation for what appeared to be variance in aptitude or appetite for theological reflection that I could then test among LMC students. I looked at personality profiling in relation to learning styles (Coffield et. al, 2004), developmental theory (Fowler, 1981; Belenky et. al 1997 [1986]; Perry, 1999 [1970]), and the way in which adults internalize authoritative aspects of faith (Le Cornu, 2005) as possible explanations.

Although some of this material would later become useful in building theory from my observations of the students, it soon became clear that there were some flaws in starting with theory and seeking to apply it to the LMC students. These flaws were connected, first with ontology – how I understand reality and the way human beings relate to it; second with epistemology – how knowledge about phenomena or social entities can be apprehended and represented; and, third, methodology – the way in which I approach the methods and instruments used in the research (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2011; Mason, 2002, pp. 14-16, 188-191; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). I now look at each of these three areas in turn.

Ontological assumptions

In seeking a theoretical understanding of theological reflection that could be applied to LMC students I had begun Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme by working deductively. A deductive approach that seeks to apply theory to experience works if it is based on realist or positivist ontological assumptions. These would suggest that social reality has existence that is independent of human subjects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 5-6; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 109-10). Such an understanding of reality does not present a good fit with a project in which I set out to explore the ways in which LMC students struggle to make meaning out of experience in light of the resources of faith.

Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8) sets out my own unique struggle in this area and my assumption is that each student has a similarly unique story to tell. The accounts they give of how they correlate faith and experience and the implications these have for their praxis is a more appropriate starting point than theories about theological reflection that are external to the students. My shift in paradigm saw these accounts together with attention to the ways in which students interact with one another, their tutors and the LMC programme, as being the place to begin my exploration. My assumption is that to be human is to interpret and, as they go about making meaning and interpreting experience, LMC students construct social reality (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp.

35-7). The ontological paradigm to which I had shifted, then, was one of social constructivism; I saw the realities I explored as being ‘apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-11) on the LMC students who had produced them.

Epistemological assumptions

The understanding of knowledge with which I began Stage 1 of the Professional Doctorate programme saw it as being ‘hard wired, objective and tangible’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.6). In light of my shift in paradigm I had come to see it as being transactional and subjectivist; research into the interactions of LMC students and the ways in which they correlate faith and experience would ‘create’ its own knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). If I had continued to adopt a positivist ‘scientific approach’ to knowledge I would have distanced myself from the realities I was investigating in order to achieve a level of neutrality. Adopting social constructivism involved taking the opposite stance; my own interaction with the students would become a source of knowledge as I became involved with them and struggled with them to make meaning out of experience (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 17-18; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011, pp. 115-116; Cameron and Duce, 2013, pp. 31-2). I thus came to see myself as a primary tool in the research process, and a self-reflexive element that pays attention to my own engagement with LMC students and theological reflection came to be of central significance (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 58-61; Etherington, 2004; Finlay, 2002).

Methodology

A positive or normative paradigm works deductively and involves the use of procedures to gather and analyse data that are designed to test theory. Such an approach may be described as *nomothetic* and can be contrasted with an *idiographic* understanding of knowledge (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 6-7). The nomothetic model is concerned with the quest to establish universal laws through the use of scientific method (Jupp, 2006, pp. 196-7). If such an approach is adopted, then for something to be true it must be falsifiable, replicable and generalizable (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 40-42). In the case of my research among LMC students, it would first be necessary to show that any theory about their aptitude or appetite for theological reflection could be tested in order to show whether or not it could be falsified; second, if the theory were to count as ‘fact’ it would be necessary to be able to replicate the test among other groups or populations; and, third, the theory would need to be generalizable among all ministerial training programmes.

By contrast an idiographic approach sees knowledge as something to be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences (Jupp, 2006, pp. 143-4; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. 43). I have suggested that LMC students each have their own story to tell about their struggle to relate sources from the Christian tradition to experience; further, I see these stories as being unique and non-replicable. This renders an idiographic methodological approach more appropriate for my research. The methods and procedures I adopted needed to serve the purpose of providing a rich description of the unique phenomenon of theological reflection among LMC students. This is an exercise in qualitative research that takes an inductive approach, seeking to generate theory.

Thus I made a shift away from a deductive approach that might be identified with a positivist, 'scientific' paradigm. My aim in designing the pilot study would be to explore the 'complex interpretative processes within which' LMC students 'struggle to make sense of their experiences including their experiences of God' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 29-30). My chosen research methods would need to attend to the interactions 'between and among' the students and to my own engagement with them (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 115).

Designing the Pilot Study

Why a focus group?

I made the decision to carry out the pilot study by conducting a focus group among a sample of LMC students. The use of this method would allow me to listen to the stories of a number of students, analyse what they had to say and explore my own part in the process. My aim was to test whether this would provide the level of interaction necessary to facilitate the generation of theory about theological reflection on the LMC.

I considered, but rejected other research methods at this stage. The first was participant observation (Cameron and Duce, 2013, pp. 50-63; Mason, 2002, pp. 91-3; Morgan, 1997, pp. 8-10). As Principal of the LMC I had access to all the lectures, discussions, seminars and group work that comprise the programme – I also had the opportunity to observe students during coffee breaks, at meal times during residential weekends and in other informal settings. Indeed, following Gadamer (2004 [1975]) I saw my own prejudgments and prejudices as being essential for me to get a purchase on what I was observing (Brown, 2012, p. 114) and these prejudgements and prejudices arose largely out of my informal observations through my participation in the programme.

Beyond these informal observations, however, I opted not to use participant observation as a method for the pilot study. The method may be more 'naturalistic' than a focus group (Morgan

1997, pp. 8-10) but this advantage and the easy access I had to the LMC programme notwithstanding, I decided that the latter would be more appropriate. There were three reasons for this. First, my role as LMC Principal meant that there would be a risk of a confusion of roles if I were to opt for participant observation – was I teacher or observer? Second, as the name implies, a focus group would allow me to focus the discussion specifically on my interest in the ways in which students correlate faith and experience (Morgan, 1997, pp. 8); and, third, I was keen to establish the difference the LMC might have made to the way the students reflected theologically and participant observation would not have given me access to their practices prior to studying on the programme.

A different approach would have been to carry out individual interviews (Cameron and Duce, 2013, pp. 82-93; Morgan, 1997, pp. 10-14). This method might have allowed me to go into greater depth with each interviewee but it would have lacked the interaction and synergy of the group. It was possible that some students would have been more willing to share openly and honestly in one-to-one interviews; but my prior experience of their willingness to interact on a range of topics suggested the synergy of a group would be more likely to generate useful data. There was also a pragmatic reason for opting for a focus group – it would take far longer to arrange and conduct individual interviews; Morgan (1997, p. 14) suggests that it takes as many as ten individual interviews to gather the same amount of data as two eight person focus groups.

Organizing the focus group

At the time I conducted the pilot study in March 2012 I had recently finished teaching a module on Christian doctrine in which six first year students had participated. The high level of discussion and productive dynamics of this group led me to identify them as participants for the focus group. The fact that the group already existed made it relatively straightforward to invite them to take part. The number studying on the LMC programme at the time of the pilot was thirty, so the focus group would consist of a sample of one fifth of the total cohort. Three of the group were training to be Readers, two to be Lay Pastoral Ministers and one to be a Licensed Evangelist. I also invited a student who had completed her training as a Lay Pastoral Minister the previous year to join the group because I thought it would be helpful to include the perspective of someone who was now licensed and practising as a lay minister. The group was not representative of the wider student body in that it was all female but I decided that this would not unduly compromise the usefulness of this exploratory study. All those invited agreed to take part. A table of participants is provided in Appendix 6 on p. 218.

I prepared a consent form and a participant information sheet for each of the students (see Appendix 4, pp. 213-4). In the information sheet I asked the participants to do a small amount

of preparation prior to attending the focus group. This involved identifying a pastoral encounter, critical incident, or other experience in which they had been involved prior to commencing the LMC programme. I asked them to be prepared to share with the group how they had thought, spoken or acted in the experience and how this might have been different now that they had studied on the LMC.

Issues of power and vulnerability

I was aware that power dynamics would be significant as I conducted the focus group (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, pp. 28-9). My role as Principal involves me in making a final recommendation to the Bishop as to whether each student should be licensed at the end of the programme. There was a danger that this would compromise the data produced. Participants might be unwilling to share about incidents that they felt showed them in an unfavourable light. Conversely, they might tell their story in a way that they felt showed them and their development of skills in theological reflection favourably. In short, there was a danger that students would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear rather than sharing how they really felt and thought about theological reflection.

In order to reduce this risk I sought to assure the participants both in the information sheet and my preamble in the meeting, that anything they said would not have a bearing on their progression through the programme or their subsequent licensing. When I had collected and analysed the data generated by the pilot study I judged that these assurances had been successful because the participants shared openly and with honesty.

Ethical issues

Prior to conducting the pilot, I applied for and obtained permission from the Anglia Ruskin University's ethics committee. The committee and my supervisors drew attention to the power dynamics as I have discussed them above. This caused me to attend to my own role more closely – could I really trust myself not to draw on what I had heard in the focus group when making decisions about students' suitability for licensed lay ministry or ordination training? The sheer amount of time I would spend analysing and reporting what had been said in the discussion might cause me to dwell on issues brought up by participants and this suggested it was unreasonable to expect to put them out of my mind completely. Later, when I began my wider study among the whole student body, this ethical issue would resurface and force me to rethink how I could carry out my research at the same time as continuing my role as LMC Principal (see Chapter 5 pp. 73-4). For the duration of the pilot study, however, I proceeded on the perhaps rather naïve assumption that I knew the six first year students well and that they

would be unlikely to share anything that would cause me to question their suitability as candidates for ministry.

I made it clear in the participant information sheet that, my written paper and final thesis apart, everything participants said would remain confidential. I assured them that pseudonyms would be used in my transcript, written paper and final thesis, that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that the recordings and transcripts would only be kept for the duration of the study. I was aware that my choice of a focus group over individual interviews meant that students would make themselves vulnerable to one another as well as to me as they interacted in the discussion (Morgan, 1997, p. 32). For this reason I asked the group members to agree at the beginning of our meeting not to disclose or discuss outside the group anything that had been shared within it. I was confident that the group members were aware that they were making themselves vulnerable and had consented to do so. I also considered that there was a high enough level of trust within the group for people to share openly and freely.

Gathering the data

The focus group took place at my home on a weekday evening in March 2012 and the discussion lasted ninety minutes. I was very well acquainted with the participants and they also all knew me and each other well. This meant that we were at ease and there was minimal need for 'ice-breaker' questions at the start of the discussion (Morgan, 1997, pp. 49-50). I recognized, however, that the pre-existing group identity would be likely to present some difficulties. I would need to be aware of shared 'taken-for-granted assumptions' and that there might be tacit agreements not to discuss some issues (Morgan, 1997, pp.34-9). There was a risk, for example, that they and I would assume that we all understood theological reflection and were able to practice it effectively; or there might have been a tacit agreement not to show the LMC and its tutors or students in a bad light. The nature of the study, and the close relationship that the students had with each other and with me, meant that I had little choice other than to live with these issues and be aware of them as I conducted the focus group.

I had to make some decisions about how directive to be. I wanted to keep the discussion focussed but, at the same time, I did not want to control it to such an extent that the students' contributions would be stifled. One way of achieving a compromise between structured and less structured ways of moderating focus groups is to adopt a 'funnel approach' (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, p. 76; Morgan, 1997, pp.39-42). This involves beginning with broad questions and discussions that are gradually narrowed as the focus group progresses. My approach was an inversion of this funnel. It began with the specific and concrete as I asked each of the participants in turn to share their chosen incident, encounter or experience, describe

how scripture or tradition had influenced the way they thought, spoke or acted and how this might have been different now that they had been studying on the LMC programme. In each case the other participants asked questions of the contributor and this led to a general discussion about theological reflection and the LMC. I concluded by summarizing my understanding of what had been said and checking whether the participants agreed with my summary. I recorded the focus group and transcribed it in full.

Learning from the pilot study

Practical issues

In October and November 2012 I extended the focus groups interviews to include the remainder of the thirty-six students who were studying on the LMC in 2012-13. My account of how I conducted these focus groups and analysed and interpreted the data is given in Part 3 of the thesis (pp. 75-118). As I planned this expansion of the project there were some practical issues arising from the pilot to be borne in mind. Arranging for the group to take place at my home was helpful; it provided a relaxed atmosphere in which an open discussion could take place. The logistics involved in arranging meetings like this for the whole student body would have been considerable, however; so I decided to conduct the focus group interviews in the full study during the LMC's residential weekends and training days.

When I conducted the pilot focus group I borrowed a dictaphone to record the discussion. This worked reasonably well but I had to listen to some parts of the recording several times and refer to my notes to understand what students were saying. It took a great deal of time and effort to produce the transcript (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 538-9). For the wider study I decided to buy a digital recording device. I also made some different decisions about transcription of focus groups in the main study; these are set out in Chapter 5 (pp. 79-80).

Findings of the pilot study

As I set out in Appendix 2 (pp. 185-90) I found that all the students in the sample were able to identify experience on which to reflect theologically. Two of them reflected on their dealings with a friend or family member who had had an extramarital affair; two chose to talk about bereavement; one told the group about a family member's diagnosis with a serious illness; one described her part in what she understood to be a dysfunctional pastoral encounter; and a final participant reflected on her experience of being seriously injured in a motorcycle accident together with her subsequent time in hospital.

All the students were able to identify sources from scripture that had informed their reflection. Two of them were able to describe how the correlation of experience and scripture had led to

revised praxis and one of these described articulately how she had used her learning about the pastoral cycle to inform the process. The rest of the participants to a greater or lesser extent struggled to come to any resolution and continued to be uncertain as to what might have constituted appropriate speech, thought or action in the situation. I noted that one of the participants who was able to show how theological reflection had led to revised praxis was the student who had completed the programme and been licensed; a resulting hunch to follow up in the further study was that the LMC facilitates more effective theological reflection as students progress through the programme. It also seemed that the more emotionally attached participants were to the situation they observed, the more likely they were to struggle to know what to do in the situations they described. Beyond that, given the small size of the sample it was difficult to discern a clear pattern.

Generating theory: the pilot study and liminality

It was possible, however, to begin building theory, or at least to generate a central research question from the data I had gathered. The observation that stood out the most was the difficulty five of the participants reported in moving from reflection to revised praxis. It was as if these students were stuck in a kind of hinterland in which they had carried out a conversation between experience and scripture but had been unable to come to any resolution. Their ‘stuck-ness’ left them unable to move either in the direction of the action suggested by experience or that suggested by scripture (Meyer and Land, 2006b, p. 25). This mirrored my own frustration that I described in Chapter 1 (p. 7) – when scripture or tradition seem to be at odds with each other what is to be done and where does ultimate authority lie? What is to be done when your interpretation of a biblical text leads you to criticize your friend for her extramarital affair with a younger man but your experience tells you to accept the new situation? How are you supposed to think when you believe in a loving God and yet for all the prayers you can muster your friend dies from her cancer or your work colleague loses her baby?

As I transcribed the focus group interview and repeatedly read through the transcript I wondered how I might interpret this apparent ‘stuck-ness’. My paper in Appendix 3 (pp. 203-4) describes how engagement with the work of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1974; 1997) led me to identify the concept of liminality as being a potentially helpful way of interpreting the data. The students concerned seemed to be ‘neither here nor there’; ‘betwixt and between’, on the one hand, awareness of the usefulness of carrying out a conversation between experience and tradition and, on the other, being able to use the insights gained to inform their ministerial praxis.

I began to think that occupying this hinterland might be a helpful and necessary stage in the reflective process – being stuck in a place where there is disjunction between opposing sources of insight or knowledge might provide precisely the kind of ‘trigger’ that facilitates effective theological reflection (Cameron et al., 2012, pp. 16-26). It also seemed possible that the anthropological theories of liminality proposed by van Gennep and developed by Turner could provide a metaphor for the way in which the LMC programme facilitates theological reflection – students are taken out of their parish communities for a ‘liminal stage’ during which they are under the tutelage of ‘elders’ (the LMC tutors) before being returned to their communities with the new status of lay ministers bestowed on them, ready to practise theological reflection and facilitate it among others. I also identified a further area of exploration. This concerned whether the LMC could be seen to provide a *communitas* (Turner, 1974, p. 232) – the kind of structure that provides an environment in which difficult questions can be addressed and critical conversations carried out.

Discovering threshold concepts

Whilst the concept of liminality would continue to be significant as my research progressed, however, it hardly did justice to what I was observing among the students. As I began to extend the research to the whole student body I became struck by how troubled some participants were by the difficulty they were experiencing in moving beyond their ‘stuck-ness’ with theological reflection. Their sense of being troubled resonated with my own struggle as outlined in Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8). Being stuck in this liminal territory, rather than providing a trigger for theological reflection, began to look more like a source of frustration.

A way of understanding this frustration was provided by a seminar for students on the Professional Doctorate programme. During this seminar, Vernon Trafford helped a group of us to think about why it might be that students often feel that they become stuck in relation to their doctoral research. Trafford (2008) introduced us to the notion of threshold concepts as a way of understanding such ‘stuck-ness’. Threshold concepts are ‘portals’ in learning through which students need to pass in order to gain understanding of a given subject area. Meyer and Land (2003, p. 1) define the notion as follows:

A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold there may thus be a transformed view of subject matter, subject landscape or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period, with the transition to understanding proving troublesome.

Threshold concepts are a recent development in higher education. The notion was first proposed at the 10th Improving Student Learning Conference in Brussels in 2002 (Land, Meyer and Smith, 2008, p. ix). This was followed by a seminal paper (Meyer and Land, 2003), a collection of papers and two further edited volumes (Meyer and Land, eds., 2006; Land, Meyer and Smith, eds. 2008; Meyer, Land and Baillie, eds. 2010). This literature has spawned an increasing number of papers and articles exploring threshold concepts from a variety of perspectives and in a range of subject disciplines.

In ways I expand on in Chapter 3 (pp. 30-7), threshold concepts are seen as having certain characteristics (Meyer and Land 2003; Land, Meyer and Smith, 2008): they are transformative, probably irreversible, and integrative of disparate pieces of knowledge; they delineate the boundaries of subject disciplines, and are often preceded by a troublesome experience of liminality. The notion represents a collection of ideas rather than a single theory. It is an analytical framework that is portable across subject disciplines and is focussed on understanding how students learn. It serves to locate troublesome knowledge within transitions, identifying epistemological and ontological barriers to learning and seeking pedagogical approaches to deal with them (Land, Meyer and Smith, 2008, p. xi). It thus has resonance with my aim to identify barriers to LMC students' learning about theological reflection.

The threshold concepts framework draws on 'a varied, rich and occasionally heady cocktail of ingredients, a kind of conceptual *sangria*' (Land, Meyer and Smith, 2008, p. xii). This includes the social anthropological theories of Turner (1974; 1997) that I referred to earlier in this chapter (p.22) and I explore further along with the Vygotsky's (1978) notion of a zone of proximal learning in Chapter 6 (pp. 101-2). Further 'ingredients' comprise social learning theory (Wenger, 1998), social constructivism (Perkins, 2006, pp. 34-6), the concept of troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999), and the conceptual change model of learning (Davies and Mangan, 2008), all of which I explicate in relation to threshold concepts in Chapter 3 (pp. 39-40). In the same chapter (pp. 40-3) I engage with two traditions that the threshold concepts framework draws on but also challenges; these are phenomenographic approaches to learning (Entwistle, 2008) and developmentalism (Perry, 1999 [1970]; Fowler, 1981; Cousin, 2008, pp. 262-3).

The threshold concepts framework provides a heuristic lens through which I view my own theological reflection and that of the LMC students. If its 'heady conceptual cocktail' is rather complex, then a simple analogy that I return to in Chapter 6 (pp. 89, 96-7, 99) helps towards understanding it. It concerns learning to swim. I learnt to swim when I was six years old. I can still remember the fear of my first few lessons. I could see other children swimming but I was

convinced that if I were to do what the instructor asked I would surely sink. For me, the notion of floating was troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999; Meyer and Land, 2003, pp. 5-9). I was in a state of liminality, held up only by floats and a rubber ring. Then came the lesson when the instructor got me to glide unaided and kick my legs at the same time; arm movements followed and I could swim. The world of swimming pools and water was irreversibly transformed; the smell of chlorine no longer evoked fear but excitement; I had crossed a threshold, learnt to swim, become a swimmer, and I would never again be a non-swimmer.

The central research question

The notion of threshold concepts resonated strongly with my journey through the early stages of my research as I described it earlier in this chapter. As I set out more fully in Chapter 3 (pp. 32-6) the threshold concept I had negotiated was the need to adopt a research methodology that was more appropriate to an exercise in qualitative research. As significantly, it chimed strongly with what I was observing among the LMC students. Could it be that the ‘stuck-ness’ described by the students was because they were in a position of liminality prior to negotiating a threshold in their conception of theological reflection? (I would later realize that there were also thresholds to be explored in relation to my own ‘stuck-ness’ with theological reflection.) This led me to identify the following central research question:

Are there threshold concepts that LMC students need to negotiate in order to practise theological reflection and, if so, what are they?

Linking the pilot with the main study

If the ‘simplest test of whether focus groups are appropriate for a research project is to ask how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest’ (Morgan, 1997, p. 17) then I judged the pilot study to have been successful enough for it to form a template for my further research with the students. The pilot had enabled me to test the feasibility of the principal method I intended to use for the main study. The data gathered had also enabled me to begin building an understanding of how LMC students correlate faith and experience and helped me to identify a central research question. I did not use the pilot study data in the summary of the main findings in Chapters 6 and 7 (Schreiber, 2008, p. 625; Cameron and Duce, 2013, pp. 96-7) – these would be based on the data gathered from the focus groups carried out with remainder of the student body in October and November 2013.

A developing methodology

The main study would seek to address the central research question as outlined above. This may sound as if it represented a return to a deductive approach in which I had presented a

hypothesis – ‘there are thresholds to be negotiated by LMC students that would enable them to correlate experience with tradition in ways that have implications for praxis’ – to be tested with the students. This is not the case. The question was no more than a staging post in a project that would continue to build theory inductively from observation of the LMC and its students. As the research progressed there would be numerous twists, turns and modifications in my understanding of theological reflection, threshold concepts and the way they can be used to provide insight into the programme and its students.

One of these twists involved a further development of my methodology. I would come to see the research itself as an exercise in theological reflection. As I set out in Chapter 4 (especially pp. 59-65) I came to see theological reflection as a mutually critical dialogue (Pattison, 1989; 2000b, pp. 9-12) between a number of ‘voices’ each of which has its own ontological and epistemological assumptions. A key ‘voice’ in the conversation would continue to be a careful description of the experience of the LMC and the way its students construct theological reflection (see my description of the ‘ethnographic’ voice of theological reflection on pp. 53-4). When speaking in this ‘voice’ I adopted a social constructivist approach as I have described it earlier in this chapter (pp. 15-17). Self-reflexivity about the way I conducted the research would also continue to be an important component as would the self-reflexivity of the students about their practice of theological reflection; this would represent a second voice (see my discussion of the ‘subjective’ voice’ of theological reflection on pp. 54-5).

I conducted the research from my perspective as a theological educator and Anglican priest, however, so I continued to privilege scripture and tradition as sources of insight (see my description of the ‘canonical’ model on pp. 50-2). The tone of this ‘voice’ suggests there is, after all, reality – in the form of the resources of faith – to which the students and I relate that exists beyond our own constructions. This voice would be a significant one in the conversation, especially as I used a biblical text to open up my understanding of threshold concepts in Chapter 3 (pp. 28-37) and reflected on my findings in Chapter 8 (pp. 120-2). I also recognized that the students’ practices, like my own, are ‘shaped by the congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110) that have become ‘crystallized’ so that they appear to be ‘real’. The project would involve asking questions about the injustices inherent in these apparent realities and the implications for theological reflection. This would represent a final voice in the conversation (see my discussion of the ‘praxis’ model of theological reflection on pp. 56-9).

As I outline in Chapter 5 (pp. 66-72), the need to be attentive to each of these voices led me away from seeing the project merely in terms of the kind of observation and thick description

associated with ethnographic research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 219-247; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 166-8) and towards the participative, dispositional and transformative approach of action research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 344-361; Cameron et al., 2010, pp. 34-45; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 255-7).

Initial research design

Having identified my central question I was in a position to outline an initial research design. I saw this as having four stages, the first of which I had already completed by conducting the pilot study and identifying my central question. The second stage would be to sharpen my understanding of that question by clarifying my conceptual framework. I would do this by engaging with literature on both threshold concepts and theological reflection. The insights generated by this literature review are summarized in Chapters 3 and 4 in Part 2 of this thesis. The third stage would be concerned with fieldwork. Drawing on the conceptual framework established in the second stage I would begin by revisiting my methodology prior to identifying appropriate research methods, drawing up a detailed design for the rest of the research, and carrying out the fieldwork. I relate the story of this stage of the research in Part 3 of the thesis: Chapter 5 deals with methodology and goes on to describe how I designed and carried out the fieldwork by extending the focus group interviews to the whole student body and carrying out interviews with tutors; Chapters 6 and 7 summarize my findings.

In the final stage of the research I would engage in theological reflection on my findings in order to work towards a conclusion. The theological reflection is presented in Chapter 8 of the thesis while in Chapter 9 I summarize my intellectual journey and answer the central research question set out in this chapter.

When my initial research design is described in this way it sounds as if it was intended to proceed in a linear fashion from one stage to another – and it is true that there was a movement through time from an emphasis on engaging with literature through to the collection of data and onto theological reflection and the drawing of conclusions. In the event there was a great deal of toing and froing particularly between the second and third stages as I revisited the literature in the light of my data in order to reflect on it and generate understanding. In the next chapter I begin to tell the story of this interaction as I explore threshold concepts.

Part 2 – Conceptual Framework

Chapter 3 – The Camel and the Eye of the Needle: Exploring Threshold Concepts

Introduction to Part 2

The central question that had emerged from the pilot study concerned whether there might be threshold concepts that LMC students need to negotiate in order to master theological reflection. This meant that I was now viewing the experience of the LMC from two distinct perspectives. The first – threshold concepts – represented a perspective in adult education; the second – theological reflection – provided a theological view. In this second part of the thesis I describe how I welded these two perspectives together in a way that would provide a conceptual framework for the project and a ‘binocular view’ (Clark, 1993, pp. 19-26) of the LMC. The story begins in this chapter as I describe how an exercise in theological reflection helped me to clarify my understanding of threshold concepts and how I intended to use the notion in my research. In the first part of the chapter I focus on threshold concepts as characterized by Meyer and Land (2003). I then draw on the later literature to enter into a critique of their framework and develop it in order to tighten my definition of threshold concepts as I use them in my project.

This paves the way for Chapter 4 in which I switch perspective to describe how I entered into a review of a variety of models of theological reflection and reached similar conclusions about the complex, and complexifying nature of my central research question.

Reflecting on a biblical image

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10.25).

Various images are employed in the literature to convey the notion of threshold concepts as I briefly described it in Chapter 2 (pp. 23-5). Meyer and Land, for example, use ‘gateway’ as an alternative to ‘threshold’ or ‘portal’ (2003, p. 2) while Land, Rattray and Vivian (2014, p. 204) convey the idea of a more protracted experience by using ‘tunnel’. The image I choose to develop an understanding of threshold concepts in this chapter came to mind as I engaged in theological reflection on my experience through Stage 1 of the doctoral programme as I described it in Chapter 2 (pp. 14-17).

Following the method proposed by Killen and de Beer (1994) I began my reflection by paying attention to the feelings I experienced as I negotiated the threshold in my learning about

qualitative research. As I came to the end of the pilot study and I contemplated how to take the project forward there seemed to be an inherent contradiction at the heart of the research. I had begun with the puzzle of how to proceed with theological reflection when there is a mismatch between experience and insights from the resources of faith – how, if at all, is it possible to harmonize the two? The pilot study, however, had taken me away from any quest for harmonization. It had led me to see the project – and theological reflection itself – as exercises in qualitative research. Such exercises entail adopting an interpretive paradigm that works inductively to complexify the phenomena under investigation in order to generate understanding (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 13-15). On one level I was searching for a way to harmonize faith and experience but on another I was beginning to work with a research paradigm that aims to uncover complexity. Research into theological reflection looked more problematic than ever. It could be likened to trying to thread something ludicrously large and misshapen through something impossibly small. This brought to mind the image of the camel and the eye of the needle from the synoptic gospels (Mark 10.25; Matthew 19.24; Luke 18.25).

I have often heard preachers make the suggestion in relation to this image that either (a) an ancient scribal error confused the Greek word *kamēlon* meaning ‘camel’ with *kamilon* meaning rope – and hence Jesus actually referred to something of the same order as a thread only much larger; or (b) there may have been a gateway in the city walls of Jerusalem called ‘the eye of the needle’ that was so narrow that camels would have to be unloaded in order to pass through it. Whilst the image involving the camel is unique to Jesus, that of an elephant and the eye of a needle is recorded elsewhere in the Rabbinic literature (McBride, 1996, p 161). My assumption, therefore, is that the emphasis is on something ludicrously large and misshapen trying to negotiate something impossibly small (Hendriksen, 1976, p. 399). It thus resonated with the troublesome nature of the progression in my learning. It chimed too with what I had observed with regard to theological reflection among the participants in the pilot study.

Jesus uses the image when, alone with his disciples, he reflects on an earlier encounter with a certain rich man. Here, I bring the whole pericope from Mark’s gospel, including the encounter with the rich man (10.17-31 cf. Matthew 19.16-26; Luke 18.18-25), into dialogue with threshold concepts in order to move towards the ‘heart of the matter’ (Killen and de Beer, 1994, p. 61) and bring greater clarity to my research question.

This involves using the biblical text in a particular way. It is a variation of the approach to theological reflection that I describe in my next chapter as the canonical model (pp. 50-2). In a way that sits rather awkwardly with the interpretive-constructivist paradigm in which I carried out the pilot study, I see biblical texts as being sources of revelatory insight; but I do not see

such insight as being apprehended by the straightforward transposition of text to current context. Rather I see the text as serving as parable (Gerkin, 1984, pp. 161-76) to challenge and illuminate current understanding and practice ‘giving it a new twist so that a fresh possibility is opened’ (p. 169). In what follows I use the pericope as a heuristic device to explore some of the characteristics of threshold concepts; but also to open the possibility that the negotiation of thresholds in theological reflection may lead LMC students to recognize the costly nature of Christian discipleship.

As the chapter progresses I explain why I have made certain exegetical decisions about the Marcan text. These decisions are important; they form their own kind of parable because the process of making them has served to open up my understanding of threshold concepts and theological reflection further.

Some Characteristics of Threshold Concepts

I bring the text into conversation with five characteristics of threshold concepts identified by Meyer and Land in their original paper (2003). These characteristics serve to set threshold concepts apart as portals that must be negotiated by students in order to master a discipline as opposed to ‘key concepts’ that build incrementally as students progress through a curriculum (Barradell, 2013, p. 266). The five characteristics are that threshold concepts are transformative, probably irreversible, integrative, bounded and potentially troublesome. To this is added a sixth characteristic (Meyer and Land, 2006b) namely that their negotiation is often preceded by an experience of liminality on the part of learners. I now bring each of these characteristics in turn into conversation with the text from Mark’s gospel.

Threshold concepts are transformative

Jesus challenges the rich man to make a radical transformation:

You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me (Mark 10.21).

Commentators suggest that there were two basic attitudes to wealth in first century Palestine. First, the wisdom perspective prevalent at the time saw wealth as a sign of God’s blessing (France, 2002, pp. 148-9; Clarke, 2009, pp. 448-9); and, second, by way of contrast, poverty was identified with piety (Cranfield, 1959, p. 331). I see both attitudes to wealth as being relevant to the rich man. He tells Jesus that he has obeyed the commandments since his youth and this may be a source of his self-identity – he is a ‘good’ person and worthy of God’s blessing. At the same time, earlier encounters with Jesus have impressed him – hence his hurry to meet Jesus, his prostration before him and the accolade ‘good teacher’ (Mark 10. 17). The

simple lifestyle of Jesus and his followers had thus awakened within the man a dissonant voice suggesting that poverty is associated with piety and there is more to life than simply obeying the commandments. This has led the man to a ‘stuck place’ (Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 24).

Jesus, however, is not content to leave him in this problematic state. He looks at the man and loves him – perhaps this is the discerning ‘look’ of a teacher who has the learning and wellbeing of his student at heart (10.21). Jesus then brings into view the threshold his questioner must negotiate if he is to move forward – there is going to have to be a complete transformation. A key exegetical decision I have made is that the man goes on to negotiate the eye of the needle; the transformation takes place. Whilst most commentators (for example, Hendriksen, 1976; McBride, 1996) see Mark 10.22 as implying that the rich man responds negatively to Jesus’ challenge, I have followed Clarke (2009) who argues to the contrary. There are two bases for the argument.

The first is structural and is based around the context of the pericope in a section of the gospel (8.27-10.52) in which the true nature of discipleship is a central theme. Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah (8.29) but from this point on Calvary and the cross begin to loom large (8.31; 9.30-31; 10.32-34). Those who would be disciples must follow a costly way, taking up their cross daily and losing life in order to save it (8.34-38); the disciples miss the point about the costly gospel and argue about who is the greatest on the way to Capernaum, so Jesus uses a child as a visual aid to point towards the primacy of service (9.33-37) before going on to rebuke the disciples for trying to send children away from him; to enter the kingdom it is necessary to receive it in the manner of a small child (10.13-16). Later, after the incident with the rich man and Jesus’ subsequent discussion with his disciples, James and John want to sit on Jesus’ right and left in his glory; but the one who would be first must be servant of all (10.35-45).

The argument is that, in this context, the rich man serves as a foil to the disciples who have so clearly not yet grasped the costly nature of discipleship. He goes away shocked and grieving (10.22) but this is not because he is unable to respond positively to the challenge – it is rather that, unlike the disciples, he has weighed the considerable cost of following Jesus accurately.

The second strand to the argument is based on the language used in 10.22. In going away (Greek *apēlthen*) the rich man is merely following Jesus’ earlier imperative ‘Go!’ (Greek *hypagete*). It is the manner in which he does so that is important. It is the use of the word *lupoumenos* (translated ‘grieving’ in the NRSV) that Clarke (2009) suggests implies a positive response. He points out that where the word or its cognates are used elsewhere in Mark – at 6.26, 14.19 and, most significantly when Jesus uses it himself in Gethsemane at 14.34 – it is

always in relation to someone feeling sorrowful about a course of action that they will later carry out. Thus the implication is that the rich man goes on to sell up and follow Jesus.

In so doing he learns that in the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, discipleship is costly – so costly, in fact that the very thing from which he derives his identity in relation to God is going to have to change. He must sell up, give his money to the poor and follow Jesus. The transformation will be both epistemological and ontological (Quinlan et al., 2013, p. 587); both his way of seeing the world and his related ways of being in the world will be changed.

This change goes beyond the man being taught a series of key concepts to be applied later in practice (Davies, 2006, pp. 72-3). The rules of the game have changed and he needs to acquire a whole new ‘episteme’. This involves taking on a ‘system of ideas or way of understanding’ that will allow him to ‘establish knowledge’ (Perkins, 2006, pp. 40-1) in the area of discipleship. His whole understanding of theology and discipleship will have changed, he will have gained access to a new way of thinking and practising, and to the community of Jesus’ followers (Davies, 2006, pp. 70-1). In Chapter 2 (p. 24) I identify Wenger’s (1998) social learning theory as one of the conceptual ‘ingredients’ of the threshold concepts framework. This sees ‘communities of practice’ as being formed by those who share a ‘domain of interest’. The rich man thus undergoes a transformation that sees him join a community of practitioners whose domain of interest is discipleship.

My recognition that research into theological reflection among LMC students would be best served by adopting an interpretive paradigm and building theory from the ground up was similarly transformative. Crossing this threshold certainly changed the view I had of my research – but it also went further, changing my way of thinking and practising, giving me access to the community of qualitative researchers in the field of practical theology, and leading me to see knowledge in other areas as being likely to emerge from paying attention to unique social or ecclesial phenomena. This reflection led me to conclude that any threshold concepts identified in theological reflection among LMC students would need to be similarly transformative, changing students’ thinking and practising and giving them access to a community of reflective lay ministers.

Threshold concepts are probably irreversible

The second of Meyer and Land’s characteristics follows logically from the first (2003, p.4). Assuming he ever negotiates the eye of the needle, the rich man is unlikely to return to his old way of thinking – the change is probably irreversible. Certainly a return to his old practices would not be an option – his wealth having been redistributed to the poor his opulent lifestyle

would no longer be available to him. The transformation is too significant and unlikely to be either forgotten or unlearned. It is like my experience of learning to swim as I described it in Chapter 2 (pp. 24-5); I will never return to my former status as a non-swimmer. Any threshold concepts in theological reflection might lead to similar irreversibility in the thinking and practising of LMC students.

In contemplating the irreversibility of threshold concepts Meyer and Land (2003, p. 4; 2006, p. xiv) engage in some theological reflection of their own, drawing on Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden in Genesis to provide a vivid metaphor (I develop this theme further in Chapter 6, pp. 81-2). The new (troublesome) knowledge symbolized by the wily serpent leads the two from innocence to freedom, responsibility and increased autonomy – but this comes at a cost. The transition is far from easy and as they look back with longing they find that it is truly irreversible – the threshold to Eden and the tree of knowledge is barred by the Cherubim and a flaming sword (Genesis 3.24).

This conveys the idea that the negotiation of a threshold may initially lead students to feel that something has been lost (Meyer and Land, 2006a, p. xiv) and it resonated with my own journey with theological reflection; in the early stages of my research I found myself wishing that I could have returned to that simple place where scripture provides straightforward answers to each and every conundrum. If my research were to show such a sense of loss and longing for a simpler past among LMC students, it might be seen to be an indicator that they have recently negotiated or are in the process of negotiating threshold concepts in theological reflection. This is a theme to which I return in Chapter 6 (pp. 98, 100-101).

Threshold concepts are integrative

The rich man's transformation involves a 'perspective change' (Mezirow 1991). His sense of self and his understanding of the world are challenged by Jesus' teaching that simplicity of life is related to godliness. This has led him into a state of liminality and, in order for him to progress, the new learning has to be integrated into his way of thinking and practising. This presents a third characteristic of threshold concepts – they are integrative.

When they talk about integration, however, Meyer and Land have something different in mind from the integration of a single piece of knowledge into a learner's understanding. They see threshold negotiation as having the potential to 'expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of something' (2003, p. 4-5). For the rich man to move forward he has to discard any previous way of thinking that would see God's blessing as being related to material wealth. The kind of integration that Meyer and Land describe is encapsulated better by the post-resurrection

experience of the disciples when the interrelatedness of disparate and puzzling teaching about Jesus' suffering becomes clear. It can also be seen in my negotiation of a threshold in qualitative research – it made me see how disparate research methods are interrelated in that they all facilitate thick descriptions of unique social or ecclesial phenomena.

Qualitative research methods, however, also serve a purpose that is not integrative – they uncover the complexity of the phenomena being explored. What should the rich man do if he has responsibilities towards others who are dependent on his wealth? Perhaps the course of action he should take is not as straightforward as Jesus' challenge would make it appear. When it comes to theological reflection it is not always possible to harmonize faith insights with experience and it will sometimes be necessary to live with discordant pieces of knowledge and with uncertainty. The negotiation of threshold concepts, argue Meyer and Land, uncovers the interrelatedness of aspects of a subject discipline – for LMC students this would involve coming to see the interrelatedness of the models of theological reflection set out in Chapter 4. At the same time, paradoxically, the conversation between those models leads to the complexification of the situations being explored.

Threshold concepts are bounded

Meyer and Land (2003, p. 5) suggest that a fourth characteristic of threshold concepts is that they are bounded; they often reveal the 'terminal frontiers' that border 'thresholds into new conceptual areas' and involve the acquisition of 'distinctive ways of disciplinary thinking' (2006b, p. 20). For the rich man and his contemporaries the threshold concept of costly discipleship might have served to demarcate Jesus' call to discipleship from other contemporaneous forms of Rabbinic Judaism. This is not to say that he would abandon the adherence to the Mosaic Law that he had practised since his youth (Mark 10.20). It is more that negotiating the eye of the needle provides him with a new and distinctive way of thinking and practising as one of Jesus' disciples.

My negotiation of a threshold in qualitative research helped me to identify its boundaries with other ways of thinking. It represents an appropriate paradigm for exploring unique but complex social or ecclesial realities such as the LMC. Negotiation of the threshold has enabled me to see where qualitative research methods are likely to provide insight and where they are not. Progression through the eye of the needle with regard to theological reflection would similarly help LMC students to identify situations where it represents an appropriate tool for providing insight into experience.

Threshold concepts are troublesome

The rich man is troubled by Jesus' challenge – he goes away shocked and grieving (10.22).

I have suggested that the central theme of the section of the gospel in which the pericope is set is the costly nature of discipleship which involves following the way of the cross (Mark 8.27-10.52). The disciples find Jesus' teaching on this matter troublesome in the extreme and consistently fail to cross the threshold that would enable them to grasp its meaning. It represents for them what Perkins (1999; 2006) describes as 'troublesome knowledge'. By this he means knowledge that is alien (in that it originates from another culture or discipline), incoherent (in that it consists of discreet fragments of knowledge that are not integrated) or counter-intuitive. Meyer and Land (2003, pp. 5-8) suggest that such troublesome knowledge may represent impediments to the negotiation of threshold concepts. The alien, counter-intuitive nature of the concept of costly discipleship seems to form a barrier for the disciples at this stage in the Marcan account.

The rich man's shock and grief show that he, too, finds Jesus teaching troublesome. To return to my earlier theme it acts for him in a parabolic sense, usurping the myth from which he has hitherto drawn his identity and opening up a new vista in which, stripped of his earthly wealth, he will be able to follow Jesus. The difference between the rich man and the disciples is that he has weighed the cost accurately – he has crossed the threshold of costly discipleship but the process has been troublesome.

This resonates with the troublesome-ness I experienced in relation to my research. I came to my doctoral studies with some tacitly held ideas about how research should be done – scientific method was deeply ingrained. The idea that I might be able to test and even prove a theory among a group of students sat unexamined in my mind, a kind of troublesome-knowledge-in-waiting. Quoting *Hamlet* (IV, v. 83-4) Meyer and Land (2003, p. 9) suggest that 'When troubles come, they come not single spies'. All that was needed was for further troubles to come along in the form of conflicting knowledge about interpretative paradigms, inductive thinking and qualitative research and I would find myself stuck in relation to my project, caught between two conflicting ways of thinking and unable to move in either direction.

I struggled through the inductive threshold as I planned and carried out the pilot study. Like Mark's rich man I found the process troublesome and costly. In my case the cost was that I began to suspect that I would have to abandon my search for harmonization between faith and experience in favour of an approach that complexifies phenomena. Some of the participants in the pilot study seemed to show similar stuck-ness to that which I had experienced – perhaps they, too, needed to cross a threshold that would lead them to grasp the complexifying nature of

theological reflection. It seems that what I was experiencing and observing was what Meyer and Land (2006b) see as an additional characteristic of threshold concepts that arises out of their troublesome nature; one that I identified among the students in the pilot study – that of liminality.

Threshold concepts and liminality

When we first meet the rich man he is in a state of liminality – betwixt and between; neither here nor there. Jesus has provided him with a new vista but it is at odds with the way of thinking from which he has hitherto drawn his identity. My assumption is that he negotiates the threshold to become a disciple. The disciples are yet to make such a move and their stay in the liminal space is more protracted. With Peter's confession of Christ (Mark 8.27-30) it appears that a threshold has been crossed; but it is immediately clear that Peter has misunderstood the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. This brings to the fore three characteristics of the state of liminality that Meyer and Land (2006b) say precedes the negotiation of a threshold concept – it may be more or less protracted, often involves 'mimicry' on the part of students and can involve 'oscillation' between new understanding and former ways of looking at a discipline. Again there is resonance both with my learning in relation to qualitative research and the students' understanding of theological reflection as revealed in the pilot study.

In the early stages of my learning about qualitative research methods I could quite happily have recited what I had been taught – I could even have given lip service to the value of approaching my project inductively rather than deductively; but I was some way short of a full understanding that would provide me with a methodological approach and link my learning with theological reflection. My ability to write and speak about qualitative research at this stage could be seen to fall into Meyer and Land's category of mimicry as it amounted to little more than a regurgitation of what I had listened to in seminars or encountered in my reading. I was in a liminal place; the threshold was clearly in view but I was yet to negotiate it fully.

Similarly, five of the students in the pilot study showed a willingness to use the language of theological reflection but without demonstrating a full understanding of it (see Appendix 2, pp. 185-90). One of the participants, for example, when asked how she decided how to act towards a friend who was having an extramarital affair stated emphatically that she had 'reflected theologically on it' but was unable to identify the traditional resources she had used in the process or how she had brought them into conversation with her experience. If my broader study of LMC students were to provide further examples of such mimicry or oscillation between states of understanding it might be seen to suggest that the students concerned are in a position of liminality prior to negotiating a threshold concept in theological reflection.

Getting stuck whilst in the process of negotiating a portal in learning is one thing – Meyer and Land go on to suggest (2006b, pp. 27-30) that variance in the understanding students bring to a subject area may prevent some of them from reaching the liminal space in the first place. They refer to this as ‘pre-liminal variation’. On the road to Caesarea-Philippi, the disciples make it clear that people demonstrate variance in their understanding of who Jesus is. The idea that he may be John the Baptist, Elijah or ‘one of the prophets’ (Mark 8.29) has become a barrier that obscures his true identity and prevents them from entering the liminal ground occupied by Peter with the result that they cannot begin to negotiate the necessary threshold in their understanding.

In light of this reflection I came to suppose that LMC students might come to the programme with tacitly held ideas about what is meant by theological reflection. These ideas might obscure the true nature of the practice and prevent thresholds in its understanding from coming into view. I decided that such pre-liminal variation among LMC students would be worth exploring in the wider project.

Critiquing and developing threshold concepts

In the first part of this chapter I have suggested that the rich man of Mark’s gospel negotiated a threshold in his learning – the eye of a needle – that was transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome. This has served to illuminate the characteristics of threshold concepts as described by Meyer and Land’s (2003) framework. My engagement with the biblical narrative has also shown some resonances with my journey in doctoral research. Drawing on Clarke’s (2009) exegesis of the text I have even been able to argue that the rich man represents a foil to the disciples’ liminality in relation to the concept of costly discipleship. This has resonated with the liminality I observed among LMC students in the pilot study. The passage has served in a parabolic sense to open up the cost that was involved in my negotiation of a threshold in learning about qualitative research – I have had to abandon my search for harmonization between the current context and faith insights in favour of an approach that complexifies phenomena. This led me to wonder whether there might be a similar cost to LMC students as and when they negotiate the eye of the needle in relation to theological reflection.

This, however, leaves me some distance from being able to show that Meyer and Land’s threshold concepts framework is robust and coherent enough to provide the central means of exploring aptitude and appetite for theological reflection among the students. I now turn my attention to a critique of the threshold concepts framework, before engaging with literature that Meyer and Land’s seminal work has subsequently spawned, in order to develop the notion further and clarify how I intend to use it in my research.

Some questions about threshold concepts

Meyer and Land's original characterization gives rise to some significant questions about threshold concepts that I needed to answer before using the notion in my wider project. First, what do they mean by 'concept'? Does it relate to a cluster of abstract ideas or a theory about learning to be empirically tested (Walker, 2013)?

Second, how are threshold concepts to be identified? Perhaps because of the newness of the sub-discipline, there is a degree of caution in some of the language used by Meyer and Land. Thresholds are described as '*probably irreversible*', '*possibly often (though not necessarily always) bounded*' and '*potentially (and possibly inherently) troublesome*' (Meyer and Land, 2003, pp. 4-5; emphasis added); the time spent in liminal space prior to negotiating a threshold may be more or less protracted (Meyer and Land 2006b, p. 24). It is also unclear how many of Meyer and Land's characteristics need to be observable for a concept to be considered a threshold. It is unclear whether some concepts – the transformative or integrative nature of thresholds, for example – should be privileged over others (Barradell, 2013, p. 266).

My first two questions relate to identifying threshold concepts within the discipline of theological reflection. A third relates to the students – what is going on in their minds as they negotiate the eye of the needle? Do they need to be able to adopt certain approaches to knowledge or learning in order to be able to do so successfully? Related to this is a fourth question. Is readiness to negotiate thresholds in theological reflection related to the position occupied by students on a scale of maturation?

If the negotiation of portals in theological reflection is related to a change in identity or worldview a fifth question comes to mind. What kind of transformation is being envisaged? What is the purpose of threshold concept negotiation in theological reflection? Is it to enable students to think and practise more efficiently and effectively within current social or ecclesial structures or to critique and transform such structures?

Finally, the notion that there may be an end in threshold negotiation gives rise to a sixth set of questions. What lies beyond the liminal space, and what factors may prevent students from reaching it? What effect might emotional responses to prior learning have and how might the faith perspective of students affect the way they negotiate liminality? Is there a postliminal state in which learning is complete and students are able to integrate faith and experience? Is it rather that the threshold to be negotiated involves recognizing that the juxtaposition of faith and

experience often involves living with messiness and contradiction? Does the negotiation of a portal in learning open up new thresholds?

The answers I now provide to the above questions are related to the research paradigm I have adopted for my project. I reject any positivist suggestion that threshold concepts in theological reflection represent objective realities that are ‘out there’ to be discovered. Rather, following Mead and Gray (2010) I see them as being reached consensually over time by the disciplinary community. In the case of the LMC this means they are constructed by the students and staff. My purpose in gathering data is to explore how they go about such construction, how this facilitates a dialogue between experience and faith perspectives, and what factors might impede the process. My own role as interpreter of the data is crucial in this. I see threshold concepts as a socially constructed lens through which I view and interpret the data (Meyer, Land and Baillie, 2010, p. x).

What is meant by ‘concept’?

I understand concepts, then, as being social constructions. They function in two ways (Perkins, 2006, pp. 41-2). The first has resonance with Kelly’s seminal work on constructs (1963); concepts serve as categorizers, for example between animal and mineral or deductive and inductive. Second, clusters of concepts have ‘underlying systems’ or ways of knowing that animate them and facilitate problem solving – the Freudian concept of self serves as an example as it facilitates interpretation, diagnosis, and treatment. Perkins uses the word ‘episteme’ to refer to these underlying systems, arguing that each subject discipline has its own episteme that can be likened to a ‘game’ the rules of which may form barriers to student understanding. Crossing a threshold concept can be equated with learning the rules of the epistemic game. One of my purposes in designing the research was to explore how, in Perkins’s terms, LMC students move ‘from concept to episteme’. How do they categorize phenomena in relation to the resources of faith, how do LMC staff and students negotiate to construct the ‘underlying epistemic game’ of theological reflection, and what are the thresholds they need to negotiate in order to participate in it?

How do we discern which concepts are thresholds?

This raises the issue of how to decide which concepts should be identified as thresholds. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm in which my project is located leads me to welcome the cautious language used by Meyer and Land. If threshold concepts are constructed by LMC students and interpreted as such by me, then it is for me to set out by what criteria I make my interpretation. Put simply, the more of Meyer and Land’s characteristics that can be shown to apply to a concept or episteme, the more likely I am to identify it as a threshold.



A tool in making such judgements is provided by a typology of conceptual change proposed by Davies and Mangan (2008, p. 39). Three types of concept are identified: ‘basic concepts’ are newly met ideas from a discipline that transform understanding of everyday phenomena; these are distinguished from ‘discipline specific threshold concepts’ – theoretical perspectives that integrate and transform other subject discipline ideas; and ‘procedural concepts’ that transform ability to ‘construct discipline specific narratives and arguments’ through ‘acquisition of ways of practising’. Threshold concepts in theological reflection would be those that are related to the second two categories in that they transform and integrate understanding and practice.

What is going on in the minds of the students?

A phenomenographic approach to threshold concepts would involve charting them onto a map of learning. Perkins (2008) proposes three types of knowledge onto which Davies and Mangan’s (2008) typology is mapped in Table 3.1 which is an adaptation of a table produced by Walker (2013, p. 249). Thus basic concepts are related to ‘possessive’ knowledge that involves accumulating basic information while threshold and procedural concepts are related to the emergence of actively employed or ‘proactive knowledge’. In the bottom three rows of the table, Walker relates Perkins’s typology to maps of learning produced by Rasmussen, Pejtersen and Goodstein (1994), Entwistle (2003) and Säljö (1979). Thus threshold concept negotiation is related to deep learning or ‘seeing things in a different way’.

Table 3.1 – Knowledge types, threshold concepts and conceptions of learning

(adapted from Walker, 2013, p. 249)

	Basic Concept 		
	 Threshold concepts		
Perkins’s Types of Knowledge	Possessive (accumulation of basic facts and information)	Performative (flexible thinking and action)	Proactive (knowledge actively employed)
Rasmussen’s Skills-Rules-Knowledge taxonomy	Skill Based (well-practised and requires little conscious effort or inspection)	Rule Based (previously stored mental template available for similar situations)	Knowledge Based (effortful conscious inspection and problem solving for which existing skills and rules are lacking)
Entwistle’s approaches to learning	Surface Learning	Strategic – Deep Learning	Deep Learning
Säljö’s conception of learning	Facts, memorizing, applying	Understanding	Seeing things in a different way

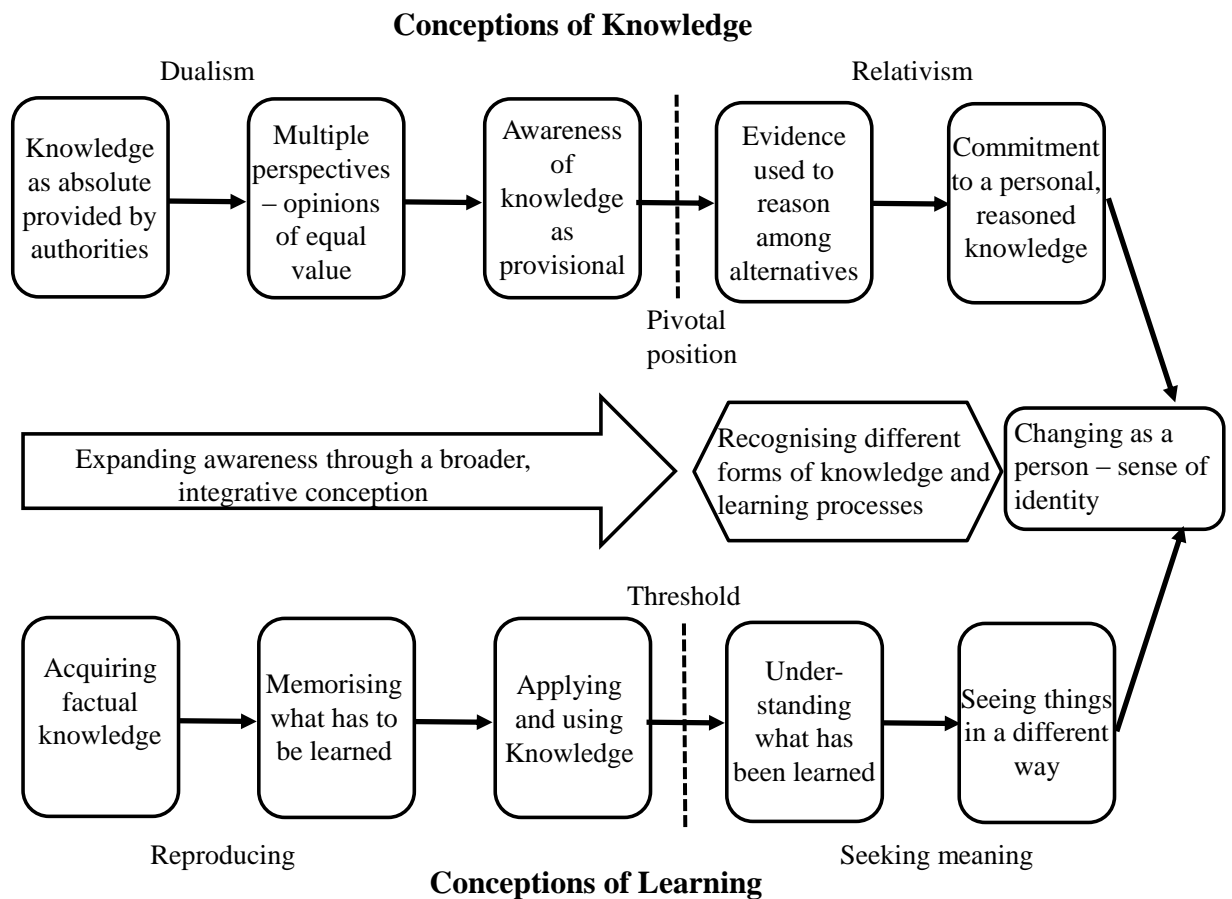
Charting threshold concepts in this way provides a way of looking at portals in learning about theological reflection by focussing attention on what might be going on in the minds of individual LMC students and tutors as they negotiate to construct the underlying episteme of theological reflection. It also points in the direction of potential preliminal variation. Some students may come to the programme with a ‘surface’ approach to learning that relates to the column on the left of Table 3.1. Such an approach focusses on coping with the course without purpose or strategy, seeing its contents in terms of unrelated facts to be routinely memorized. Others may seek to gain the highest grades possible and so adopt a ‘strategic’ approach to learning. This is related to the centre column of Table 3.1; it involves a consistent effort to study effectively and work is geared to the perceived preferences of the tutors. Students who approach the LMC as ‘surface’ or ‘strategic’ learners are likely to find negotiation of the eye of the needle more troublesome than those whose approach is to be identified with the column to the right of Table 3.1. These learners adopt a ‘deep’ approach, relating learning to previous experience, seeking out underlying principles, approaching sources critically, and becoming actively involved in the contents of the programme (Moon, 1999, pp. 121-126).

Is threshold concept negotiation related to maturation?

A further possibility is that proactive knowledge or deep learning – and thus, according to the typologies presented above, negotiation of thresholds – may be related to the maturity of individual students. In his seminal work on intellectual development among college students Perry (1999 [1970]) posits nine developmental positions moving from dualism in which right/wrong perceptions predominate to personal commitment within acknowledgement of relativity. These nine positions can be clustered into five stages as represented by the top row in Figure 3.1 on p. 42.

As awareness expands through a broader, interpretive conception, individuals are seen to pass through a pivotal position as shown by the dotted line between the third and fifth stages in Figure 3.1 on p. 42 as they learn to use evidence to reason between alternatives. Such pivotal positions may also be discerned in the schemes proposed by other developmental theorists; in the case of Fowler’s (1981) work on faith development, for example, the key point comes between stages 3 and 4 where synthetic-conventional faith gives way to individuated reflective faith. This leads to positions associated with relativism and potentially to a changed sense of identity.

Figure 3.1 – Developmental stages in conceptions of knowledge and learning (reproduced from Entwistle, 2008, p. 27).



The bottom line in Figure 3.1 represents a map of conceptual learning based on the work of Säljö (1979). The movement here is from reproducing knowledge to making meaning with, again, the potential for changed identity. The pivotal point here is represented as a threshold. The implication is that, in order to negotiate thresholds in learning, students need to have reached a stage in intellectual development where they can recognize different forms of knowledge and learning processes.

Undoubtedly there is variance in the stage of intellectual development reached by students when they begin the LMC programme and developmental theory helps to draw attention to such variance. As an approach to exploring threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students, however, it should be used with caution. The idea that there is a pivotal developmental position involving the acceptance of relativism is contentious. As I discuss further in the conclusion to Chapter 6 (p. 97) it suggests that a Western, liberal way of thinking has to be adopted if reflectors or learners are to reach maturity. If traditional sources are

understood to be insightful, however, there is an extent to which they may also be seen as authoritative. Acceptance of such authority could be seen as being necessary for the mature practice of theological reflection. Moreover, generalizable statements that students need to have reached a given point in a developmental schema are at odds with my epistemological approach. I designed the main study to build theory from my observations of the students rather than to test a developmental theory against my observations.

What kind of transformation is envisaged?

The notion that negotiation of a portal may lead to a change in identity begs an answer to questions about the scope of the transformation and purpose of the threshold concepts framework. In using the word episteme to describe the ways of knowing associated with subject disciplines, Perkins (2006, pp. 41-3) borrows from Aristotelian thought. Baillie, Bowden and Meyer (2013) borrow further from Aristotelian language to make a link between threshold concepts, *technē* and *phronēsis*. By *technē* they mean ‘know how’; progress through the portal is not only about changed *thinking* but also about changed *practising*. *Phronēsis*, often translated ‘prudence’, refers to practical wisdom; so the idea conveyed is that going through the eye of the needle leads students to *practise* wisely.

There is a link here with ‘praxis models’ of theological reflection that draw on the tradition of reflective practice (Schön, 1983) as I describe them below in Chapter 4 (p. 56). The purpose or *telos* of threshold concepts here would be to think and do what we currently think and do more wisely and efficiently. As I discuss in Chapter 4 (pp. 56-7), however, praxis models for theological reflection also draw on a rather different tradition – that of liberation theology. Now the focus, rather than being on greater efficiency, switches to a radical critique of current practices and structures leading to transformation. This is an important aspect for threshold concepts in the field of theological reflection. My argument in the next chapter is that the critical voice provided by liberation theology has an important part to play in any theologically reflective dialogue; so the *telos* of threshold concepts in this particular discipline must go beyond improving current pedagogy or practice. Negotiation of the eye of the needle may involve a process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1996 [1970]) in which there is a radical transformation of students’ understanding of current praxis.

What are the factors affecting the negotiation of liminal space?

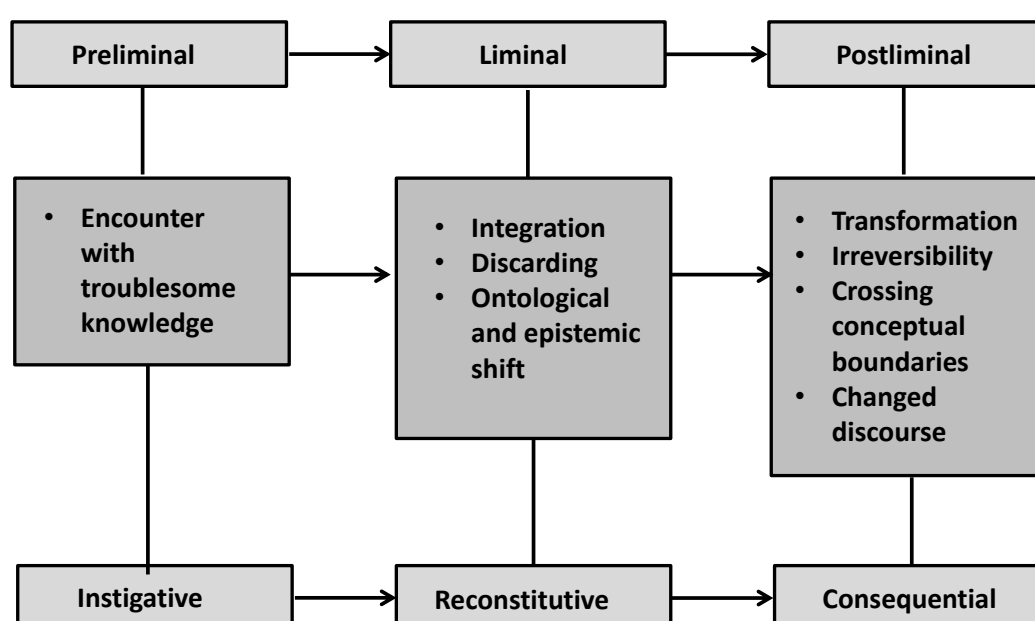
Entwistle’s diagram as reproduced in Figure 3.1 (p. 42) may be seen to suggest that progress towards these ends is smooth and uninterrupted. Meyer and Land’s framework, however, in a way that resonates with my own experience and the Marcan text around which I structured the opening part of this chapter, suggests that negotiation of thresholds in learning is likely to be

preceded by a stage of liminality that may be characterized by mimicry and/or oscillation between states. I now look at some further factors that may affect negotiation of this liminal space.

A development of the threshold concepts framework is represented diagrammatically by Meyer, Land and Bailie (2010) and reproduced in Figure 3.2. It will serve to facilitate my discussion of liminality.

Figure 3.2 – a relational view of the features of threshold concepts

(reproduced from Meyer, Land and Baillie, 2010, p. xii).



The diagram shows progression through the threshold as being instigated by an encounter at a preliminary stage with troublesome knowledge. The liminal stage is seen as being reconstitutive as old ways of understanding are discarded and there is integration of new knowledge leading to an ontological and epistemic shift. The consequences of this shift are seen at the postliminal stage where there has been an irreversible transformation resulting from the crossing of conceptual boundaries, opening up a changed discourse about a subject discipline.

Perry (1999, pp. 11-12) suggests that progression through his developmental stages may be impeded as students adopt strategies of temporizing (postponing movement to a new stage) escape (to the detachment offered by the positions associated with provisionality) or retreat (to the earlier positions of dualism). Such strategies may be adopted during the liminal stage and delay or prevent progression through a threshold concept. I discuss this possibility more fully in Chapter 6 (pp. 83-4, 86-7, 85, 99-100).

A criticism of Perry's schema is that its later individuated stages reify positivist approaches to knowledge in which the learner retains a dualistic distancing from what is being learned (Clark, 1993, pp. 26-7; Slee, 1993). A corrective comes from Belenky et al. (1997 [1986]). They call the epistemological position associated with dualistic distancing 'separate knowing'. A 'unique and authentic voice' is developed as women (and, by inference, men too) move to a position of 'constructed knowledge' at which there is an integration of objective and subjective knowing leading to a more relational, holistic epistemological position. Such a holistic approach to knowing would pay more attention to the affective aspects of the learning process.

The rich man in the Marcan narrative experiences shock and grief so there is certainly an emotional aspect involved. My negotiation of a threshold in qualitative research was affected by previous humiliation and embarrassment in relation to learning, and I noted the effect emotional involvement had on the way students in the pilot study told their stories about theological reflection. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) suggest that reflection in learning involves returning to an experience and attending to the feelings involved. This facilitates an exploration of how the affective aspects of an experience either provide opportunities for, or put up barriers to learning.

It raises the possibility that the affective aspects of learning might either obscure or bring into view threshold concepts (Efklides, 2006; Cousin, 2006). Hull (1985, pp. 57-60) suggests that such affective aspects may be particularly significant when Christian adults experience 'bafflement' as religious language or symbols lose their potency to explain experience – in such situations Hull suggests that adults may experience a loss of comfort or security. Le Cornu (2005) argues that the 'authoritative external voices of faith' – that is impersonal features such as doctrines, creeds and scripture, together with personal ones such as clergy or church leaders – may prevent progression through Perry's stages or Belenky et al.'s positions and carry sufficient weight to restrict development of the self. Timmermans (2010, pp. 15-16) says that there may be 'multiple layers of context' and 'proximal influences, such as family or religion' that affect development of the 'epistemic self'.

Thus the possibility presents itself that alongside troublesome knowledge and language, pre-liminal variation in faith perspectives and frameworks have the potential to be factors that hinder the reconstitutive process in the liminal space for some students. This may be all the more problematic where students hold strong emotional attachments to their beliefs – it may result in a protracted stay in the liminal space or even prevent it from being negotiated at all.

Beyond the liminal space

Figure 3.2 implies that the process of negotiating a threshold is a linear one that begins with an encounter with troublesome knowledge and leads to integration in a transformed postliminal state. Other approaches to learning similarly see it as a process that begins with disjunction – thus for Hull (1985, pp. 91-45), cognitive dissonance is a stimulus to learning for Christian adults; for Mezirow (1991) perspective transformation begins with alienation from previous perspectives; and for Jarvis (1993, pp. 7-9; 2010, pp. 83-4) disjunction between previously constructed biographies and experience is the catalyst for learning. Disjunction is also seen as a catalyst in the literature on threshold concepts. Savin-Baden argues that

...disjunction is not something to be seen as unhelpful and damaging, but instead as dynamic in the sense that different forms of disjunction, enabling and disabling, can result in transitions in students' lives (Savin-Baden, 2006, p. 163).

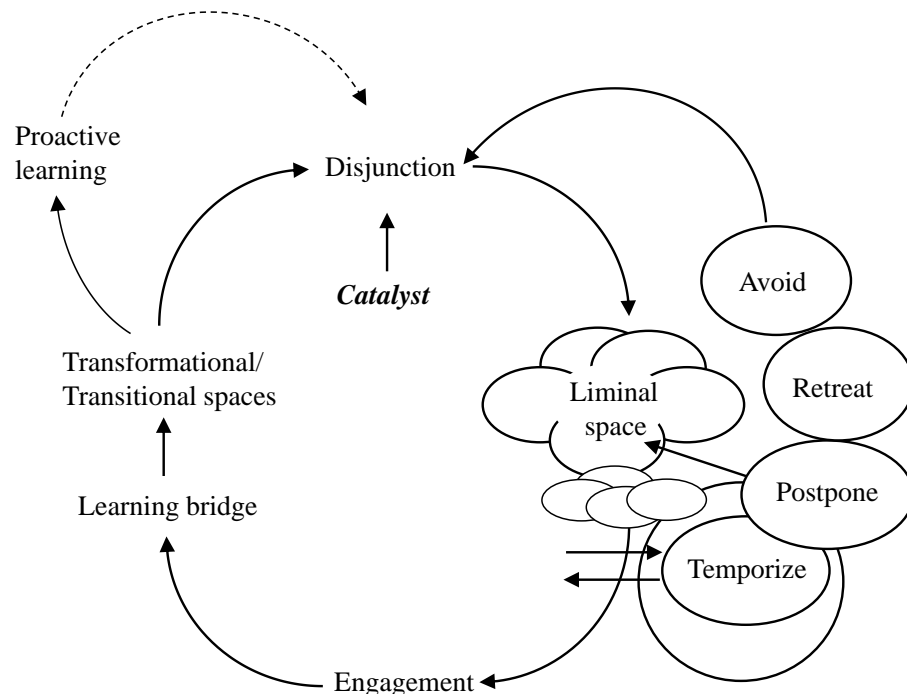
It is questionable, however, whether such transitions necessarily lead to integration and completion of the learning process. Booth (2006, p. 173) suggests that in order to negotiate threshold concepts in philosophy students may need to 're-evaluate or distort parts of their common-sense understanding of the world'. Here the emphasis shifts from integration to the deliberate creation of disjunction in order to facilitate learning.

I began this chapter wondering where learning about qualitative research might leave my quest for harmonization between experience and faith perspectives. I had begun to suspect that the purpose of theological reflection might be the qualitative aim of pointing to the complexity of experience. Meyer and Land (2006b, pp. 24-5) relate the story of how, as he tried to work out the mathematical formulation of his general theory of relativity, Einstein was only able to go forward when he learnt the language of tensor calculus. They suggest that in doing this he actually created his own liminality. The possibility presents itself that the purpose of theological reflection is to create disjunction between faith insights and experience in a way that opens up the possibility of learning.

In the diagram reproduced in Figure 3.3, Savin-Baden, rather than seeing threshold concept negotiation as leading in linear fashion to a postliminal state, represents the process as a cycle or spiral of learning. Thus disjunction is the catalyst for learning that leads learners into a liminal space. Within the liminal space, various strategies may be adopted to deal with the disjunction – avoidance or retreat lead back to the original cause of disjunction; postponement or temporizing may cause the liminal stage to become protracted. Engagement opens up the threshold – Savin-Baden prefers the image of a learning bridge – leading to transformation and proactive learning. Significantly proactive learning completes a round of the spiral but rather

than leading to the end point of a postliminal state leads to a new situation in which there may be further disjunction leading to another round of the spiral.

Figure 3.3 – a model of transitional learning spaces (reproduced from Savin-Baden, 2008, p. 80)



It may be that negotiation of the eye of the needle in theological reflection will lead students to enter into a spiral, seeking out disjunction and liminality in order to gain greater insight into the situations they explore.

Conclusion

The rich man of Mark's gospel was in a hurry to meet Jesus. It seems that he was keen to learn about eternal life and he was ready for the disjunction that Jesus' challenge would present. The text opens up the possibility that there is a cost involved in negotiating the eye of the needle. In theological reflection that cost may involve giving up the quest for harmonization between faith and experience in favour of a complexifying approach. This cost may seem high – 'Then who can be saved?' cry the disciples (Mark 10.26).

I have argued that threshold concepts may provide an interpretive lens for the way LMC students and their tutors go about such costly theological reflection and the factors that may inhibit them. In the next Chapter I tell the story from the other lens of my binocular view of the LMC as I turn to the complexifying nature of theological reflection. Theology may be a helpful

place to move next in view of the intractable nature of the dialogue between faith and experience – ‘For mortals it is impossible’ replies Jesus, ‘but with God all things are possible’ (Mark 10.27). My next task is to explore what further insights are made possible by a turn to the theological.

Chapter 4 – Towards a Critical Conversation

Introduction

In this chapter I continue the story of how I constructed the conceptual framework for my project, focussing this time on theological reflection. Exploration of threshold concepts caused me to suspect that my research, rather than involving a quest for harmonization, would involve searching out disjunction and complexity as catalysts for learning. In what follows I show how I came to a similar conclusion about theological reflection. I do so by describing how, as the research progressed, I came to see theological reflection as a mutually critical conversation (Pattison, 1989; 2000b, pp. 9-12) between four ‘voices’. I begin by identifying these voices and explaining why I chose the metaphors of ‘voice’ and ‘conversation’ to describe them. I go on to assess the contribution each voice makes to the dialogue and relate each one to threshold concepts. This progresses the thesis in three ways. First, it enables me to clarify what it is that the LMC seeks to facilitate among its students; second, because I see the research itself as being an exercise in theological reflection it shows how I began to develop my methodological framework; and, third, it brings together the two lenses of my ‘binocular vision’ as it shows how I negotiated further thresholds in my own understanding and identified areas to begin exploring threshold concepts in the students’ practice of theological reflection. I conclude the chapter by entering into a critique of the notion that understanding theological reflection as a mutually critical conversation is the threshold concept *par excellence* in its practice.

A mutually critical conversation

Four conversation partners

The mutually critical conversation approach to theological reflection is exemplified in the work of Pattison. Originally he proposed a three-way critical conversation for theological reflection involving (a) ‘the beliefs, assumptions and perceptions provided by Christian tradition (including the Bible)’; (b) ‘the contemporary situation being examined’; and (c) the ‘ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and assumptions’ of the person doing the reflection (Pattison, 1989, p. 139). As I set out in Chapter 1 (pp. 4-7), the initial concern I brought to the research involved a dialogue between the first two of Pattison’s partners as I considered how the Bible and other traditional resources can be used to interpret experience. In this Chapter I develop these conversation partners, calling them the canonical and ethnographic voices respectively for the reasons set out on pp. 51 and 53.

In Chapter 2 (p. 16) I said that I came to see myself as a primary tool in the research process and that a self-reflexive dimension became significant for the project. This relates to the third of Pattison’s conversational partners and I explicate it as the subjective voice. As the research

progressed I also came to recognise the importance of paying attention to the actions of those doing the reflection. I develop such attentiveness as a fourth conversational partner – the praxis voice. In a later development of his mutually critical conversational model of theological reflection, Pattison (2000b, pp. 9-10) includes a fourth conversational partner comprising ‘relevant insights, methods and findings that emerge from non-theological disciplines’. I see such insights as being important aspects of the ethnographic and praxis voices. These, then, are the four partners that I see as participants in the mutually critical dialogue – the canonical, ethnographic, subjective and praxis voices.

Metaphors of voice and conversation

I chose the metaphors of voice and conversation to describe my approach to theological reflection with care. As this thesis unfolds I will relate how the research led me to realize that I had hitherto seen theological reflection as a primarily cognitive process with the result that I had distanced myself from the realities on which I was reflecting. In an exploration of attentiveness in pastoral theology, Leach (2007, pp. 24-5) draws on Belenky *et al.* (1997 [1986]), to point out that such distancing is implied by the metaphors of ‘sight’ and ‘seeing’ that are often used to convey the idea of ‘standing at a distance to get a proper view’ in scientific enquiry. Belenky *et al.* found that women were more likely to use metaphors of ‘voice’ and ‘hearing’ to describe their ways of knowing and suggested that these convey the notions of engagement, dialogue and interaction far better than metaphors of sight do. In order to recover a thorough engagement with the experience on which I am reflecting, I therefore follow Leach and Belenky *et al.* and use the term ‘voice’ to describe each of the partners in the reflective conversation.

The metaphor of a mutually critical conversation is also important for my understanding of theological reflection. Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, pp. 138-169) explore a ‘method’ of theological reflection that they call ‘speaking of God in public’; it has resonance with the mutually critical conversation because it involves correlating tradition with contemporary culture. They suggest that such correlation may take place in one of two ways. First, an apologetic approach sees the gospel as fulfilling or completing human questions or thought-forms; and, second, a dialectical approach sees theological understanding as being glimpsed in secular thought-forms (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 138).

I came to a different understanding as my research progressed and this is expressed well by the metaphor of a *mutual* conversation. It involves holding a number of approaches together in a creative dialectic in which human growth occurs through dialogue and revelation is found in the on-going relationship between the gospel on the one hand and the contemporary context on the other (Bevans, 2002, pp. 88-102). Rather than seeing one as being a fulfilment of the other, each

of the voices is seen as a contributor to a conversation that needs to be listened to in its entirety. It may be that the voices do not agree, but the dialogue seeks out disjunction and complexity as catalysts for learning and insight. In what follows I summarise what attentiveness to each of the voices brings to the dialogue, exploring in the process the pitfalls involved in over-attentiveness to each of the voices, and relating each of them to my research and threshold concepts.

The canonical voice

Outline of the voice

I start with the canonical voice. Attention to this conversation partner involves looking to the Christian tradition (including the Bible) for theological insight (Bevans, 2002, pp. 37-53; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 78-108). Bennett (2013, pp. 24-51) traces two traditions in protestant practical theology that arose in the wake of Kant's undermining of traditional proofs of God's existence. The first, following in the tradition of Schleiermacher, valued knowledge that comes through history, science and philology and stressed the importance of experience and humanistic tools in theological enquiry. Later, a second tradition followed Barth in turning back towards the autonomous God whose self-revelation is made through scripture and to an authoritative tradition. The canonical voice represents a methodological approach that is oriented towards the second, Barthian tradition.

I choose the term canonical to describe it for two reasons. First, it sees propositional truth or revelation as in some way or another being deposited in the canon of scripture and/or tradition (Pattison, 2000a, p.109). Tradition here refers to the creeds, liturgies or magisterium of a church or ecclesial community that go alongside the scriptures to form the authoritative 'canon' of that community. The assumption is that the truth deposited within this tradition can be 'translated' to a given cultural context (Bevans, 2002, p. 40). Second, the word 'canon' comes from the Greek for 'rule' or 'measure'. Thus it conveys the idea of measuring the current situation against the insights offered by tradition.

Critique of the voice

There is an extent to which theological reflection within a Christian context, if it is to be truly theological, necessarily engages with insights from tradition. Attention to the canonical voice is, therefore, an essential dimension of theological reflection as I understand it. But as my own journey with theological reflection shows (see Chapter 1, pp. 5-8) over-attentiveness to the canon at the expense of other methodological voices may prove to be problematic. The problems lie in three areas. First, I described in Chapter 2 (pp. 14-17) how I came to see my research as an inductive process. The difficulty is that the canonical voice may be seen to imply a deductive approach that begins with truths that are deposited in the canon and works

downwards to apply them to experience. Its propositional approach might thus be seen as being at odds with the inductive methodology of my project.

Second, the model locates knowledge in the past and particular interpretations of scripture and/or the tradition may come to be understood as being immutable with the result that the role of the Holy Spirit or the faith community in interpreting experience are down-played or relativized (Pattison, 2000a, p.109). The timeless truths of scripture and tradition are thus seen as supra-cultural and supra-contextual (Bevans, 2002, p.40) and generalizable to each and every situation and population. This may lead to the assumption that there is a single reality within the text that is readily apprehendable and easily applicable to experience. An inductive approach to theological reflection, by contrast, would see truth as emerging from careful observation of the current situation. The text is then engaged with to illuminate those observations further and is thus seen as having multiple meanings to be engaged afresh within the complex realities of each context.

Third, there are questions to be asked about which texts should be regarded as canonical and how they should be interpreted. Are some texts (such as the gospels) more revelatory than others? Which biblical stories should be told (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 15-16)? Such choices may be arbitrary or they may be based on unacknowledged extra-traditional presuppositions (Pattison, 2000a, p. 113). Readers may seek to find their own perspective in the text thus transforming its meaning rather than allowing the text to inform their situation (Thiselton, 2012, p. xv).

Attending to the voice in the research project

If the approach of the canonical voice were to be crudely employed in my project it might involve an attempt to discover generalizable, propositional truths about learning and conceptual change within the tradition followed by their straightforward application to the context of the LMC. If such an approach were to be taken it would be particularly vulnerable to the criticisms I have outlined above and might lead to the kind of mismatch between scripture and experience that I described in Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8). It is possible, however, to take a more nuanced approach that retains the assumption that the tradition is a source of knowledge or revelation. Such an approach would see tradition as the source of insight rather than authority.

In the previous chapter (pp. 28-27), for example, I reflected on Mark 10.17-27 because its account of the rich man and the image of the eye of the needle provided insights that illuminated the concept of liminality and the negotiation of thresholds in adult learning. In doing this I was not suggesting that this text or my interpretation of it is the last word on conceptual change among LMC students or other adult learners – it is rather that engagement with the text allowed

it to serve as parable, opening up a deeper exploration of the topic. I recognize that other texts might have been selected to say something quite different. God's care of the Israelites in the wilderness or Jesus' relationship with his disciples in the gospels, for example, might suggest incremental learning rather than the sudden change associated with negotiating thresholds.

The voice and threshold concepts

Thus attentiveness to the canonical voice also requires me to pay attention to the choices I have made in identifying and interpreting the text. Have I simply taken the notion of threshold concepts on board uncritically and lifted a passage from the gospels to support this extra-traditional idea? There needs to be a reflexive element that pays attention to the way I have handled the text. Recognition of the necessity of this reflexive element may involve crossing a threshold in understanding. It thus presented itself as an area for me to begin looking for threshold concepts in the theological reflection of the students. To what extent are LMC students aware of the need to be reflexive about the way they have chosen and interpreted texts? Does such reflexivity lead to the transformed, irreversible, integrative understanding of theological reflection that would be associated with the negotiation of a threshold concept?

As I began the wider fieldwork I expected that these questions would be of key significance. As the findings in Chapter 6 (pp. 89-90) show, however, it initially appeared that fewer than half the students had engaged with a traditional text. The canonical voice would remain important, but in order to understand its part in LMC students' theological reflection I would, as I outline in Chapter 7 (pp. 108-9), need to negotiate a further threshold in my own understanding.

The ethnographic voice

Outline of the voice

My second category is the polar opposite of its canonical conversation partner (Bevans, 2002, p. 54). It starts with human culture (Schreiter, 1985; Kinast, 2000, pp. 40-51; Bevans, 2002, pp. 54-69; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 200-229). I call it the ethnographic voice because it assumes that theological insight will emerge from a thick description of the experience being reflected on, and the human context within which it is set. In terms of Bennett's (2013, pp. 24-51) two post-Kantian traditions it lines up with Schleiermacher in valuing human experience and humanistic tools over an authoritative tradition. Stress is placed on human beings as created in God's image; human nature is seen as being good, holy and valuable and so human culture is regarded as shaping the reception and transmission of the gospel and the focus is on creation rather than redemption (Bevans, 2002, pp.56-7). The Christian community may have developed a tradition over time – and this may be understood to have been mediated by the Holy Spirit – but the community has authority to reinterpret the tradition and develop it further.

Listening to the ethnographic voice involves paying attention to the form the gospel takes in a particular place or time and taking human identity seriously (Bevans, 2002, p. 54). God's revelation is not understood as being supra-cultural or supra-contextual but as being bespoke for a particular situation and time. It follows that it is idiographic rather than nomothetic in its orientation (Bennett, 2013, p. 42); it points in the direction of methods that are inductive rather than deductive and the uniqueness of each context suggests that it is not possible to generalize.

Critique of the voice

Attending to the ethnographic voice in theological reflection is important because it starts where people are and takes human culture and experience seriously. But if it is not balanced by attentiveness to other methodological approaches the risk is that practitioners will fail to bring traditional insights into a critique of culture. Thiselton (2012, pp. 606-12), for example, is concerned about a tendency among pastoral theologians to place too much emphasis on human experience with the result that what he sees as the asymmetry between the Bible and the current situation is not recognized. There are further questions to be asked of the ethnographic voice about the relationship between the particular and the universal, about whether it leads practitioners too far from tradition, and about the extent to which it facilitates truly *theological* reflection.

Attending to the voice in the research project

But the ethnographic voice encourages a methodological approach to research that seeks a thorough description of the LMC and the ways its students engage in theological reflection. Following its methodology leads to an inductive approach that understands knowledge about theological reflection on the LMC as arising from the ground up, based on observation of the students. It aligns with the methodological approach I adopted in the pilot study (see Chapter 2, pp. 14-17). It might also expect to find insights in the social sciences that illuminate the patterns observed among the students. Approaches to educational theory such as threshold concepts might help towards an explanation of my observations. This makes it a significant voice for my research project.

The voice and threshold concepts

It may also represent a methodological orientation that is significant for LMC students as they engage in theological reflection – it encourages them to pay careful attention to the knowledge that emerges from the human situations on which they reflect and the cultural contexts within which they are set. Thus it provided a further clue as to what the negotiation of threshold concepts may involve for theological reflection among LMC students. I began the wider

research expecting that the practice of theological reflection would involve integrating a reflexive approach to the use of traditional sources with an inductive approach to the experience being explored.

The subjective voice

Outline of the voice

The fact that fewer than half the students appeared to engage with canonical texts, however, forced me to recognise that there is more to theological reflection on the LMC than a straightforward dialogue between tradition on the one hand and experience and human culture on the other. A third partner in the mutually critical conversation is the subjective voice. When attention is paid to this voice in the reflective dialogue there is a switch in emphasis from the world of the objective to that of the subjective. The starting point is the interior self and the individual's experience of God (Bevans, 2002, pp. 103-116; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 18-45). Theological insight is not something that is 'out there' to be distilled from the tradition as the canonical voice would suggest or from human culture as ethnographic voice would suggest – rather, 'theology happens as a person struggles more adequately and authentically to articulate and appropriate [their] on-going relationship with the divine' (Bevans, 2002, p. 105).

Self-reflexivity – 'defined as an acknowledgement of the significance of the self in forming an understanding of the world' (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p.20) – is of key significance when attending to the subjective voice. It employs such methods as autobiography, letter writing, verbatim reports and journaling to provide access to the interior self (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p 18). Bennett (2013, pp. 23-5) draws attention to Bultmann's observation that presupposition-less exegesis of the Bible is impossible and assessment of the interpreter's pre-understandings is of key significance in interpreting texts or situations (Gadamer 2004 [1975]). The subjective voice orientates the practitioner towards internally held presuppositions and pre-understandings and so may be understood as being essential for the practice of theological reflection.

Critique of the voice

If attention is paid to the subjective voice at the expense of its conversation partners there is a danger that practitioners will fail to engage with the reality that they are embedded in the webs of social, institutional and political power (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 45).

Practitioners need to recognize, then, that the individual exists in a social and historical context, that the self is formed out of a dialogical engagement with others, and there is a communal aspect to theological reflection. There are also questions to be asked about the criteria by which

subjective authenticity is judged (Bevans, 2002, p.108). Attention needs to be paid to the ways in which individuals internalize the external dimensions of faith, both personal and impersonal; engagement with traditional resources contributes to the formation of the self (Le Cornu, 2005) and a critical account of this process needs to be given. I pay attention to these issues as I reflect on my own praxis and that of the LMC students and tutors in Chapters 7 (pp. 111-3) and 8 (pp. 120-1).

Attending to the voice in the research project

Attention to the interior self has significance for my research project. In Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8) I described something of how my experience has shaped my own understanding of learning and theological reflection; I develop this further in Chapter 8 (pp. 120-1). My internally held views and framework of faith affected the way I conducted the research and my responses to the students in the focus groups; the same factors also influenced the way I recorded and analysed my findings. This self-reflexive aspect (Etherington, 2004; Finlay, 2002) became more prominent as the research progressed and led to a change in methodological emphasis. In Chapters 5 (pp. 70-2) and 7 (pp. 108-113) I outline how, in light of my findings, I came to see the importance of an internally held disposition or *habitus* of faith (Farley, 2001, pp. 35-41; Graham, 1996, pp. 101-3) in the practice of theological reflection. The need to pay attention to the way this *habitus* is formed led me away from seeing the study merely as an ethnographic investigation into the practices of the students and towards the participative, dispositional knowing that, as I spell out in Chapter 5 (pp. 66-72), is associated with the methodology of action research.

The voice and threshold concepts

I suggested in my discussion of the canonical voice that those LMC students who have negotiated a threshold in theological reflection might be able to be reflexive about the way they have chosen and interpreted traditional texts. A readiness and ability to pay attention to the interior self and to integrate such reflexivity with other voices might be considered a further characteristic of having apprehended a threshold concept in theological reflection. This was a further area of exploration in my wider fieldwork, and as I make clear in Chapter 7 (pp. 108-113), it took on greater significance as I analysed and interpreted my findings.

The praxis voice

Outline of the voice

Attention to the final partner in the critical dialogue seeks insight through critical reflection on praxis (Bevans 2002, pp. 70-87; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 170-179). I call it the praxis voice. When attention is paid to this voice the highest level of knowing is seen as being

‘intelligent and responsible doing’ and it involves a movement away from the maxim ‘faith seeking understanding’ and towards ‘faith seeking intelligent action’ (Bevans, 2002, p. 73). Orthopraxy (right action) rather than orthodoxy (right thinking) becomes the criterion by which the validity of theological reflection is established (Pattison, 1997, p. 33).

My introduction to theological reflection on the Aston Training Scheme (see Chapter 1, p. 6) involved adopting a praxis approach. As was the case with Green’s method (2009, pp. 19-27) practitioners of praxis approaches to theological reflection often employ variations of the pastoral cycle as a way of interweaving theory and practice. This provides a process that typically begins with experience before moving through stages of exploration, reflection and response leading to a new situation or renewed understanding. The pastoral cycle has its roots in two quite distinct directions (Bennett, 2007, pp. 41-2; 2013, p. 102). The first emerges from a first world, Northern hemisphere context and its focus is on the enhanced practice of professionals. It is derived from the work of Schön (1983) on reflective practice and draws on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle (see Figure 1.1 on p. 11). It serves the aim of helping professionals to respond efficiently and flexibly to situations of change and flux through ‘reflection-in-action’. This moves them into the centre of their own learning so that they become reflexive, problem-based, intuitive and synthetic in their practice (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 4-5).

The outcome of reflection-in-action may be understood in terms of the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom or *phronēsis* which can be contrasted with technical knowledge or *technē* that is much valorised by modernity (Dunne, 2011). The outcome of theological reflection among LMC students may similarly involve *phronēsis* in the face of the complex pastoral situations they face. Viewed in this way reflection-in-action might be seen to improve the ministerial effectiveness of LMC students.

What it does not do is provide them with an understanding of praxis as an on-going dialectic between action and reflection that leads to transformative action in the face of injustice and oppression. This provides a contrast with the second root of the pastoral cycle – the liberation theology of Latin America. Like reflective practice and the ethnographic voice as described above (pp. 53-5), liberation theology begins with human experience. Rather than regarding human culture uncritically, however, it sees it as having a tendency towards corruption and distortion and as being in need of emancipation and healing (Bevans, 2002, p. 75).

The classic epistemology of liberation theology is epitomized in the work of Clodovis Boff (Bennett, 2007). Boff (1987, pp. 87-92) draws a distinction between ‘classic’ and ‘political’

theology. The former is identified with the canonical voice and utilizes scripture and other resources from the tradition to seek knowledge of God. The approach differs from that of the canonical voice in that ‘classic’ theology is not seen as providing appropriate tools for primary analysis of the current situation. For such primary analysis, liberation theology turns to the ‘sciences of the social’, especially Marxist critical theory which provides the ‘contours’ that map out social realities, making them real objects on which to theologize (Bennett, 2007, p, 43). It is only once this mapping has been done that ‘classical’ theology is brought into play to reflect theologically on the realities that have been mediated by the socio-political analysis.

Boff (1987, pp. 71-77) employs Althusser’s (2005 [1965]) model of theoretical practice with its ‘three generalities’ to define this theologizing. ‘Classic’ theology is the second generality, a conceptual framework operating on the first generality of the current situation as mediated by social analysis to produce the third generality of ‘political’ theology (Bennett, 2007, p. 33). Political theology is thus the outcome of the theologizing that transforms praxis and brings healing and emancipation to human experience. This root of the pastoral cycle would lead LMC students to go beyond acting wisely within the current system to seek healing and transformation for the situations on which they reflect.

Critique of the voice

A criticism can be made of praxis approaches from the perspective of threshold concepts; the two very different roots of the pastoral cycle have the potential to create a level of conceptual confusion among LMC students, making it difficult for them to negotiate thresholds in understanding it. Further if the focus were to be on the reflective practice aspect alone, the purpose or *telos* of theological reflection would be to think and do what we currently do more effectively and wisely, opening it up to the same criticism as the one I make in Chapter 3 (p. 43) of the notion that the sole *telos* of threshold concepts is *phronēsis*. Where injustices are inherent in current practices theological reflection needs to go further to include the transformative voice of liberation theology.

Rooting the praxis voice in liberation theology gives rise to its own problems, however. In Boff’s epistemology the role of theology is restricted to a ‘critical, systemizing function’ (Bennett, 2007, p. 44) as it works on the current situation as mediated by social analysis. His work implies a ‘breach’ (Boff, 1987, p. 151) between theology and the praxis of LMC students. This undervalues the part played by spiritual formation and students’ internally held framework or *habitus* of faith in their practice of theological reflection. In Chapter 7 (pp. 108-113) I chart the importance of contemplative prayer and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit in the theological praxis of students and tutors; in Chapter 8 (pp. 120-5) I describe how this was significant for my

own learning about theological reflection. The ordinary faith practices of LMC staff and students have more significance for the way they theologize on experience than Boff's epistemology would suggest.

Boff's work implies that theology does not have the appropriate tools to mediate the current situation. This does not sit comfortably with what I already knew about students' theological reflection when I began the fieldwork. In the introductory module of the LMC programme, students study the Old Testament book of Amos. Its prophetic critique of ancient Israelite culture in which the ruling classes 'trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way' (Amos 2.7) leads students to enter into a critique of contemporary capitalism. A theological text thus serves as a tool to map the contours of the current situation. In the same module contemporary feminist perspectives (Fiorenza, 1983, pp. 253; 268-270) are used to critique the 'household codes' of the New Testament (Ephesians 5.22-6.5; Colossians 3.18-4.1). There is more interplay between insights from theological resources and those from the social sciences than is implied by Boff's approach.

Attending to the voice in the research project

These criticisms notwithstanding, attention to the praxis voice is important for my research. It helps to focus analysis of theological reflection among the students on the way it informs their ministerial practice. Further, liberation theology suggests that the 'sciences of the social' provide appropriate methods for primary analysis of my experience of the LMC. Educational theory – in particular the insights provided by threshold concepts as set out in Chapter 3 – provide the 'contours' of the experience and open it up for theological reflection leading to transformed understanding and practice. The discussion above on Boff begs the question of how such analysis is related to theological resources such as the text from Mark's gospel on the camel and the eye of the needle; can such resources also provide primary tools of analysis or must they wait for educational theory to provide its analysis first? The position I take on this issue is that when texts are used as parable to open up understanding in the way that I use the Marcan text in Chapter 3, the two – analysis offered by social sciences and that provided by theological resources – can be used in tandem.

The voice and threshold concepts

The praxis voice suggests two places in which I might begin looking for threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students. First, evidence of having negotiated a portal will be provided where students are able to show that they have thought critically about their ministerial practice and changed or transformed it where appropriate; and, second, whatever criticisms may be levelled at the methodology of liberation theology, it suggests that students

who have successfully negotiated the threshold will be aware of the need to pay careful attention to social injustice and to use appropriate socio-analytical tools.

A threshold concept *par excellence*?

I have now outlined how the canonical, ethnographic, subjective and praxis voices contribute to a mutually critical conversation. In view of my discussion it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that understanding theological reflection as a dialogue between these voices represents the threshold through which LMC students need to pass in order to engage in its practice. It might be seen as *transformative* and *irreversible*, leading students to see theological reflection as engaging in multiple sources and embracing complexity rather than focussing narrowly on either tradition or experience; it might further be seen as *integrative*, bringing together the various voices as it does in one dialogue; its status as a conversation might be understood to define the *boundaries* of theological reflection as a discipline; and negotiating a threshold that may change the way students think about the relationship between traditional sources and experience is likely to prove *troublesome* for many students. Thus it could be seen as demonstrating all the characteristics of a threshold concept as proposed by Meyer and Land that I set out in Chapter 3 (pp. 30-7). It could be seen as the threshold concept *par excellence* in theological reflection.

But this would be to jump too quickly and easily to an answer to my central research question. The pilot study showed that some students seem to occupy a position of liminality in relation to theological reflection. The idea that this might be because they are approaching a threshold in its practice presented itself as a possible explanation for this liminal status – an idea I decided to explore in a wider study of students. But the pilot study did not prove that there is a threshold to be negotiated; much less that such a threshold involves recognizing that theological reflection involves a critical conversation between the voices. My discussion in this chapter has enabled me to identify some methodological approaches to theological reflection and make some tentative suggestions as to thresholds that might be associated with each. To form a theory from the discussion at this stage and test it against my study would be a step too far and would involve approaching the research deductively, working from theory to practice. My stated methodological approach is inductive and seeks to ascertain whether thresholds emerge as I analyse my data.

There are, in any case, some questions to be asked of the critical conversation model of theological reflection. Is it really possible to engage in a conversation with the Bible and other texts, ancient or otherwise? In the end is it necessary to make a choice between text and experience? Does the approach lead practitioners towards a naïve and simplistic synthesis

between the voices? And does the model as I have outlined it do justice to the literature on theological reflection? I now attend to each of these questions in turn.

Is it possible to engage in a conversation with the text?

It is important to emphasize that there are significant limitations in seeing theological reflection as a conversation. Bevans (2002, p. 31) uses the word ‘model’ to outline a number of methodological approaches to contextual theology. He sees each of his models as representing ‘a “case” that is ‘useful in simplifying a complex reality’. Each model does not ‘fully capture’ the reality it seeks to convey but ‘it does yield true knowledge of it’. In a similar way, Graham, Walton and Ward survey ‘methods’ of theological reflection. They see these methods as Weberian ‘ideal types’ that provide useful abstractions for heuristic reasons (2005, p. 11). This is how I understand my conversational approach to theological reflection: it is a model that provides a helpful abstraction from a more complex reality in a way that serves to progress the discussion.

Its status as an abstraction from reality means there are points at which the model becomes problematic. In a real conversation with another human being it is possible to go back to a conversation partner to ask questions or seek clarification. This can be done with the ‘living human documents’ that are involved in the situation on which theological reflection is being carried out (Bennett, 2013, pp.94-5). It may even be possible to question or seek clarification from people who have expertise with the tools of social analysis that may be used in theological reflection. But this cannot be done in the case of biblical or other ancient texts that are important parts of the tradition. Here, there is an interpretive gap to be bridged; the text cannot ‘answer’ and it may be impossible to recover the intentions of the authors.

In cases where there is ambiguity in interpretation of my data I can go back to my focus group participants and ask them if I have understood their contributions correctly. I can discuss how insights from educational theory such as threshold concepts help towards an understanding of the data with colleagues, my supervisors or other knowledgeable people. It is also possible to correspond with the originators of such theories. Here a genuine dialogue can be said to be taking place. What I cannot do is engage with the originators of ancient texts – all I can do is be reflexive about the way I have interpreted and used passages such as the one from Mark’s gospel and the eye of the needle.

Does a choice need to be made between text and experience?

The mutually critical conversation model is open to criticisms in opposing directions from advocates of both the canonical and the ethnographic voices. These criticisms are seen by

Bennett (2013, pp. 44-5) in terms of the ‘tyranny of experience’ and the ‘tyranny of the text’. The criticism from the canonical standpoint is that the conversation might result in the practitioner ‘selling out’ (Bevans, 2002, p. 95) to the ‘*zeitgeist* of the moment’ in such a way that secular thought forms are absorbed uncritically (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 167) – the tyranny of experience. From the perspective of the ethnographic voice there are questions to be asked about why it should be that certain texts are taken as canonical and by what criteria they are judged as being free from human ideological distortions – does the critical conversation escape the tyranny of the text?

A naïve and simplistic synthesis?

It may also be argued that the model encourages practitioners to see a simplistic synthesis between the conversation partners where none really exists. There will be situations when the insights offered by the four voices simply do not agree. In such cases what are the criteria by which judgements are made between them? Experience in the contemporary context, for example, may lead practitioners to see gay and lesbian relationships as disclosing God’s love while the scriptures might be understood by the same practitioners as prohibiting such relationships. Once a choice is made between these approaches the person doing the reflecting will either have favoured the canonical or the ethnographic voice. If the dissonant voices are held in tension with one another, practitioners may find themselves listening to a confused cacophony rather than a creative dialogue.

This leads my exploration in the direction of an alternative explanation of the liminality experienced by the students in the pilot study. Perhaps they already carry out a critical conversation as they practise theological reflection. Rather than being a portal they need to negotiate in order to integrate dissonant learning, perhaps it is the very act of bringing a variety of methodological approaches into conversation that accounts for their being stuck in the first place – the voices do not agree making it difficult for the students to know how to think, act or speak in the situations they describe. A threshold concept in theological reflection might involve being prepared to live with the messiness and complexity that is often the outcome of the mutually critical dialogue.

Does the model do justice to the literature?

A final limitation of the mutually critical conversation model concerns the literature I have drawn on to construct my version of it. Bevans (2002) summarizes six ‘methods of contextual theology’ while Kinast (2000) and Graham, Walton and Ward (2005; 2007) outline five ‘styles’ and seven ‘methods’ of theological reflection respectively. The possibility presents itself that in

reducing these to four categories I have omitted some important voices from the mutually critical dialogue and failed to do justice to the breadth of literature on theological reflection.

When Bevans's work was originally published in 1996 it contained five 'models of contextual theology' all of which map onto my voices. What he calls the 'translation', 'anthropological' and 'praxis' models (Bevans, 2002, pp. 37-87) correspond respectively to my canonical, ethnographic, and praxis voices. A fourth 'synthetic' model (pp. 88-102) holds the preceding three in a creative dialogue and so relates to the mutually critical dialogue itself. His fifth 'transcendental' model (pp. 103-116) has resonance with my subjective voice. In Bevans's second edition (2002, pp. 117-37) he included a sixth category that he calls the counter-cultural model. It draws on the work of Hauerwas and Willimon (1989) and Newbigin (1989). Its context is Western culture and its opposition to the gospel. The gospel narrative is seen as being concretized in the Christian community that constitutes a colony of 'resident aliens' and engages in a radical, prophetic critique of the hostile wider culture. The narrative of the gospel is thus privileged in much the same way that scripture and tradition are privileged by the canonical voice.

I had a hunch before I began the fieldwork that Bevans's counter-cultural model would not sit comfortably with the context of the LMC. The village communities that comprise much of the Diocese of Peterborough perceive themselves to be under threat and the church is often the last institution to maintain a presence in such places. There is in these villages a far greater overlap between church and community than would be implied by the model. It is equally questionable whether LMC students would want to understand themselves as telling a story and existing within a colony that is in contradistinction to the multi-ethnic communities in some of the urban areas of the diocese. The Church of England's sense of identity and role as the national church also sits uncomfortably with such an ecclesiology. As I gathered and analysed the data I remained open to the possibility that students might employ a counter-cultural model to practise theological reflection. My hunch, however, turned out to be accurate; the students did not see their theological reflection as being informed by their membership of a counter-cultural community of 'resident aliens', so I did not develop the model as a voice in the dialogue.

The reason that there are some 'leftover' categories from the summaries offered by Kinast (2000) and Graham, Walton and Ward (2005; 2007) is that, as their choice of terminology suggests, they stress the 'style' or 'method' employed to conduct the conversation. My emphasis at this stage has been to explore the dialogue as a methodological approach; that is to say I have been concerned with *methodology*. They are rather more concerned with ways of going about theological reflection that are specific and concrete and bring to mind the research

methods I discussed in Chapter 2 (pp. 17-21) and develop further in Chapter 5 (pp. 75-80). They are more concerned, then, with *method* although their overviews contain elements of both *method* and *methodology*.

Kinast's 'inculturation style' (2000, pp. 40-51) relates to my ethnographic voice. His 'feminist style' (2000, pp. 27-39), meanwhile, shares a concern with the liberationist strand of the praxis voice. Its practitioners seek critical analysis and theological reflection leading to the transformation of the unjust structures associated with patriarchy. His remaining three styles are concerned with how the theologically reflective dialogue is conducted. A 'spiritual wisdom style' (Kinast, 2000, pp. 15-26) draws on the method of Killen and de Beer (1994) as I discussed it in Chapter 1 (p. 7) and employed it in Chapter 3 (pp. 28-9). It represents a method in carrying out the critical dialogue. This involves employing the imagination to get to the 'heart of the matter' and correlating this with 'the Christian heritage' (Killen and de Beer, 1994, 63-66). As I suggested in Chapter 1 this restates a by now familiar question; what happens when the voice at the 'heart of the matter' is at odds with 'the Christian heritage'? A similar question is raised by Kinast's 'ministerial style'. Drawing on Whitehead and Whitehead (1995) this involves a conversation between faith traditions, personal and communal experiences, and contemporary culture (Kinast, 2000, pp. 7-14); but which voice carries the greatest weight; tradition, experience or culture?

Kinast's final 'practical style' of theological reflection (2000, pp. 52-63) focuses on the work of Browning (1991) and concentrates on the practices of Christian communities. There are four 'movements': thick description of current practices (the ethnographic voice) is followed by a critical reading of historical, normative texts (the canonical voice) in light of the description; a movement of 'systematic theology' leads to a fusion of horizons between the two (Gadamer, 2004 [1975]); and the insights are then implemented in a final movement of 'strategic practical theology'. The difficulty comes with the third movement and restates the question: is it really possible for there to be a fusion between discordant voices? Is it not rather that practitioners have to live with and learn from the untidiness that is the outcome of the dialogue?

I suggested earlier in this chapter (p. 50) that Graham, Walton and Ward's 'method' of 'speaking of God in public' (2005, pp. 138-169) can be related to the mutually critical conversation. In their chapters on 'telling God's story' (pp. 78-108), 'theology in the vernacular' (pp. 200-229), 'theology by heart' (pp. 18-45) and 'theology-in-action' they outline 'methods' that map onto the voices in the reflective conversation as I have described it. The two left over are their 'methods' of 'writing the body of Christ' (pp. 109-37) and 'speaking in parables' (pp. 47-77). Both of these point forward to Part 3 of the thesis and my account of the

fieldwork. 'Writing the body of Christ', like Kinast's 'practical style' is a corporate method that has its focus on the practices of the Christian community and how it constructs its identity. The focus group interviews attended to the practices of the LMC students and an understanding of how they negotiate threshold concepts in theological reflection emerged from them.

'Speaking in parables' involves employing 'the creative potential people have to construct meaningful stories out of the varied circumstances of their lives' (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 47). The stories the LMC students told in the focus groups, and the creativity they showed as they interpreted them in the light of faith insights, is laid out as I summarize my findings in Chapters 6 and 7. Graham, Walton and Ward also see 'the stories recounted in scripture' as being 'important within this method of theological reflection' (2000, p. 109); the summary of findings also describes how the students employed the canonical voice to interpret their experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shifted from Chapter 3's lens of adult education and threshold concepts to that of practical theology and theological reflection in order to complete the conceptual framework for my research. I have engaged with literature on theological reflection and some early observations based on my data to set out how I see theological reflection as a mutually critical dialogue between four methodological 'voices'. I have suggested that there may be limitations to how far this understanding of theological reflection as a conversation can be seen as the threshold concept *par excellence* in its practice. Further exploration of literature on theological reflection in the penultimate section of the chapter restated questions about which voice in the conversation carries the most authority and pointed to the complexifying nature of theological reflection.

Engagement with literature on styles and methods of theological reflection also brought to the fore questions about how a mutually critical reflective dialogue can be carried out. Such questions take centre stage in Part 3 of the thesis as I tell the story of how I planned and carried out my fieldwork and analysed the data. As I do so I narrate how I continued to develop an understanding of my own stuck-ness with theological reflection and that of the LMC students and their tutors. I start in the next chapter by tying together some loose ends from Parts 1 and 2 as I show how my four-fold conversational model of theological reflection led to a shift in methodology towards the social science tradition of action research. In light of this I then go on to describe the methods I used to conduct the fieldwork and explore thresholds in theological reflection.

Part 3 – The Fieldwork

Chapter 5 – Planning the Conversation: Research Design

Introduction to Part 3

Part 3 of the thesis tells the story of how I carried out my wider research. I begin in this chapter by outlining why I made a methodological shift away from seeing the project as an exercise in ethnography (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 219-247; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 166-8) and towards seeing it as action research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 344-361; Cameron et al., 2010, pp. 34-45; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 255-7). I do this by drawing some parallels between theological reflection and action research. I go on to consider some ethical issues before describing the methods I used to gather the data. Chapters 6 and 7 summarize my findings.

Theological reflection and action research

From ethnography to action research

Theological reflection, I stated in Chapters 2 and 4 (pp. 26 and 49), as well as being the subject matter for my research, also represents my methodology for the project. In the last chapter I suggested that theological reflection involves careful attention to each of the voices in a mutually critical conversation. Attention to the ethnographic voice would continue to involve entering into an empirical description of the way LMC students and tutors go about theological reflection. To that extent the methods I set out in the second half of this chapter were designed to provide an ethnographic account of the LMC. But, as the project progressed, I came to see the importance of approaching the research in ways that would allow me to pay adequate attention to the other voices in the conversation. This led to my methodological shift away from ethnography and towards action research.

Listening to the subjective voice would involve not only being attentive to my own subjectivity but also to the way my participants engaged with their interior selves as they engaged in theological reflection. The fieldwork needed to be designed in such a way as to be *intersubjective* (Winter, 2014, pp. 3-5). It would have to draw out how the LMC students and tutors' view theological reflection – their subjective view – and relate it to my own understanding. Attention to the praxis voice, moreover, focusses not only on my own practices but also those of the participants. The aim of the research was to enrich my own professional practice and this would involve enhancing the praxis of the students and my colleagues. And so I came to see that, as well as being intersubjective, theological reflection in the wider project

would need to be corporate (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 108-137) and participative (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 227-8), dimensions that attracted me to action research.

Action research is a form of social science inquiry that is founded on the ‘indivisibility of value and action’ (Graham, 2013, p. 148). The axiom goes that ‘actions speak louder than words’; action research is rooted in the notion that they also speak louder than theories or propositional statements. Human actions, then, are value-laden so that research into them is likely to yield knowledge. Such knowledge works from the ground up, emerging from inquiry into actions; this renders it contextually and experientially based. I do not make the claim that my research is an exercise in action research *per se* but the approach does bear some striking parallels with my conversational model of theological reflection as laid out in Chapter 4. In what follows, therefore, I identify some features of action research in order to illuminate further my methodology of theological reflection.

A focus on practical issues

First, action research is focussed on practical issues and on real life problems (Coghlan, 2004, p. 99; Graham, 2013, pp. 150-1). It has roots in a number of places, among them Lewin’s (1946) problem-centred approach to organizational management that draws on the wisdom of participants in order to achieve change (McNiff, 1988, pp. 22-6). Thus the tacitly held understanding of LMC students and tutors provides ‘insider’ knowledge (Graham, 2013, p. 152) about threshold concepts in theological reflection and the methods I describe in the second part of this chapter were designed to draw out this knowledge. The parallel here is with the ethnographic voice in the theologically reflective dialogue as set out in Chapter 4 (pp. 53-4). The aim is to provide a picture of the way this group of people practises theological reflection from which insight will emerge.

A participatory form of research

But action research goes further as it seeks to explore insider knowledge by adopting participatory forms of inquiry (Coghlan, 2004, p. 99; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 257-8; Graham, 2013, pp. 150-2). It is ordered towards collaboratively negotiated improvements in practice (Winter, 2014, p. 2). This feature points to a significant dimension of my research methodology. A further parallel is that both action research and my project have roots in social constructivism. I suggested in Chapter 3 (pp. 39-40) that theological reflection and threshold concepts in its practice are socially constructed by the LMC students and tutors. It is for this reason that greater understanding of the issues is likely to arise in collaboration with my participants. They are the ones who are likely to be able to identify why they have difficulty with theological reflection; and so I am more likely to find answers to my research question by

working with them. The participants also stand to gain from the research as greater understanding of theological reflection and thresholds in their practice of it is likely to enhance their ministry.

The full implications of the collaborative, intersubjective dimension to theological reflection only emerged as I conducted the fieldwork. I began by seeing myself as ‘the researcher’ and the LMC students and tutors as ‘the researched’. It was only as I started to learn about theological reflection from the participants that I understood the value of seeing them as my co-researchers. This became particularly significant towards the end of the fieldwork when I conducted the final, validating focus group interview (see Chapter 7, pp. 112-7). At that stage I was able to explain the notion of threshold concepts to the students so that we could work together in identifying some thresholds in their practice of theological reflection. We were able to work collaboratively to transform and enhance our theological praxis.

A focus on process

The focus of action research is as much on process as it is on outcome (Coghlan, 2004, p. 99). It involves cycles of planning, observation and critical reflection (Winter, 2014, p. 2). I pointed out above that action research traces one of its principal roots back to Lewin’s (1946) organizational theory. Lewin thought that the best way to move people forward was to enable them to enquire into their own lives and saw this as happening through spirals of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (McNiff, 1988, pp. 22-6). There are obvious resonances here with the pastoral cycle and so with the praxis voice in theological reflection. My research design involved planning spirals of action and reflection that would enable me to work with my co-researchers to identify threshold concepts in theological reflection. Because the assumption is that insight is likely to arise from the process there is further resonance with the mutual, critical conversation model that is the lynchpin of my methodological approach. The dialogue itself is likely to lead to insight. The methods I adopted for the fieldwork needed to facilitate the conversation and point to the complexity of theological reflection among LMC students. My methodological approach avoids jumping too readily to an artificial synthesis and expects that a significant outcome of the process is to provide researcher and co-researchers with greater aptitude for further rounds of action and reflection.

A dynamic of emancipation

Like the praxis voice in the reflective dialogue, action research goes beyond the mere enhancement of current practices: there is more to it than doing what is currently done more effectively or efficiently. It involves a ‘dynamic of emancipation’ (Coghlan, 2004, p. 100) and Freirean pedagogy provides another of its roots (Graham, 2013, p. 155). The resonance here is

with the liberationist root of the pastoral cycle as I describe it in Chapter 4 (pp. 56-7). My exploration is designed to identify blockages in theological reflection among LMC tutors and students so that they will be able to move beyond them to transform their ministerial praxis.

Action research as a tool in practical theology

Importantly for this project, action research can be used as a tool in practical theology.

Precisely how brings to the fore some issues that are related to the discussion in Chapter 4. One approach resonates with the canonical voice in the mutually critical dialogue. It assumes that action research methods serve a relatively fixed gospel or ongoing mission of God (Swinton and Mowat 2006, pp. 254-9). The question raised is one of whether the fruits of action research can reshape tradition (Graham, 2013, p. 160). If the answer is that they cannot, the canonical voice will have obscured its conversation partners.

The method of ‘theological action research’ (Cameron et al., 2010) is more likely to facilitate a mutually critical dialogue as attention is paid to the four theological ‘voices’ I set out in Chapter 1 (p. 12), thus providing a thorough exploration that has potential to transform both the theology and practices of a church or organization. The problem remains, however, of how much weight to give to each of the voices in the conversation. The method also falls short in that it involves professional researchers as ‘outsider teams’ whose positionality is not explored and, as a consequence, the researchers ‘remain resolutely “off the page” in terms of any declaration of their own reflexivity’ (Graham, 2013, p. 164).

A further approach would be to draw parallels between action research and practices from Christian tradition; Coghlan (2004; 2005), for example, sees cycles of prayer, action and reflection in the ‘Spiritual Exercises’ of Ignatian spirituality as providing a method for instilling a theistic disposition in action researchers. A step further would be to see the process of action research itself as the potential locus for transformative theological or spiritual insight (Graham, 2013; Winter, 2014), a possibility that I now explore as I relate a penultimate characteristic of action research to my methodology of theological reflection; its focus on dispositional knowing.

A focus on dispositional knowing

Recognition of the dispositional nature of theological reflection puts me as researcher ‘on the page’ as it identifies a further threshold in my learning; in so doing it brings the subjective voice into the theologically reflective dialogue. It also goes some way towards explaining how the canonical voice can be brought into play because it recognizes that traditional resources have been internalized by the person or persons doing the reflecting. Action research involves dispositional knowing because its practically focussed, participative, emancipatory processes

provide a ‘way in which we can contact the deepest “ontological levels” of who we are as human beings’ (Winter, 2014, p. 6). Because it concerns itself with ‘the inner self of practical wisdom’ as much as it does ‘the outer world of situations’ (Graham, 2013, p. 164) it has the potential to inform theological understanding and so to be revelatory.

Herein lies the threshold in my learning. My original area of research, as I described it in Chapter 1 (p.4), concerned the correlation of experience with resources from the Christian tradition. My unacknowledged assumption was that these ‘resources from the Christian tradition’ are relatively fixed and consist of creeds, doctrines and scriptures. I came to realize that tradition is more living and dynamic and involves a developing framework of faith or disposition towards God that is held within believers.

Farley uses the word *habitus* to refer to a disposition of the soul towards God that, together with self-conscious scholarly endeavour, forms the ‘essence, agenda and telos’ (2001, p. 44) of theology. My original approach was concerned rather more with the ‘self-conscious scholarly endeavour’ half of the equation than it was with the ‘disposition of the soul towards God’. The former continues to be an essential part of theological reflection as I understand it. I now recognized, however, that the methods I employed to conduct the research would need to take account of the way in which the *habitus* of faith is formed among LMC students.

Exploring habitus

Habitus is the Latin word used by the Scholastics to translate the Aristotelian term *hexis*. It refers to ‘an enduring orientation and dexterity of the soul’ (Farley, 2001, p. 35) and is often rendered ‘acquired disposition’ in English (Crossley, 2014, p. 141). The term was taken up by Mauss (1934) who saw it ‘in terms of facets of culture that are anchored in the practices of individuals, groups, societies and nations’ (Savin-Baden, 2014, p. 12). It thus refers to cultural facets such as customs, skills, tastes, aspirations or styles that are shared by a group or class.

It was developed further by Bourdieu who saw *habitus* as ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, [...] predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (1977, p. 72, emphasis original). These durable dispositions are internalized and serve to regulate or orchestrate practice without the need for ‘obedience to rules’ (p. 72); they are the ‘raw material’ on which human agents ‘improvise’ (Graham, 1996, pp. 102-3). They are historically generated but over time *habitus* become ‘increasingly tacit’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79; Crossley, 2013, p. 142) and they become ‘second nature’ as their historical genesis becomes ‘forgotten’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78-9 see also Graham, 1996, p. 103). But, describing *habitus* as ‘second nature’ does not mean it is the same thing as mechanical habit (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). *Habitus* involves dexterity and

know-how and ‘captures the skilled activity of the expert player rather than the conditioned response of the lab rat’ (Crossley, 2014, p. 139).

In Chapter 3 (p. 45) I drew on the work of Le Cornu (2005) to propose that the potential for internalized, authoritative dimensions of faith to hinder negotiation of thresholds in theological reflection would provide an avenue for investigation in my research. Such authoritative dimensions, I now suggest, represent, in Bourdieu’s terms, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions* that play a part in the formation of the *habitus* of faith. These dimensions represent internalized ‘raw material’ that LMC students correlate with experience in order to orchestrate practice. They do so without necessarily involving conscious reference to the ‘rules’ of traditional texts. My methods, therefore, would need to draw out the ways in which such facets as the voices of clergy or church leaders, creeds, dogmas or scriptures have been internalized in students, how these have contributed to a disposition of faith, and how students bring this *habitus* into the theologically reflective conversation. I still understand the self-conscious engagement with traditional texts – for example in the way I used the Marcan text in Chapter 3 – as being an essential part of theological reflection. Attending to the part played by such texts in the formation of *habitus*, however, brings a rich conversation between the self-reflexivity of the reflector(s) and the canonical voice into the process of theological reflection (Leach, 2007, pp. 27-9).

At this stage I make an important point about how I understand *habitus*. Graham (1996, p. 101) suggests that Farley sees the tradition that instils the *habitus* of faith as being a fixed one. If this is the case, the canonical voice has come to predominate because tradition once again has precedence over current practice and cannot be reshaped by it. To move towards an understanding of *habitus* that maintains the critical dialogue, I follow Graham (1996, pp. 101-3) who draws a comparison between Farley’s approach to the concept and that of Bourdieu. For the latter *habitus* are ‘often transformed in the very process of their reproduction’ (Graham, 1996, p. 102); there is thus a dialectical aspect as *habitus* are formed by human actors who are both the ‘subjects of agency and the objects of history’ (Graham, 1996, p. 102-3; Mead 2015). That would make LMC students and their tutors both agents whose action and reflection shape and develop a living tradition and objects who are themselves formed and shaped by that tradition as they develop a *habitus* of faith. The methods I set out in the second half of this chapter were designed to explore this ‘both/and’ with my co-researchers and to consider if there are threshold concepts relating to it.

My discussion of *habitus* brings the exploration of action research towards its conclusion. Action research has clear parallels with the way in which the conversational model of

theological reflection employs the ethnographic, subjective and praxis voices, but it also adds an important participatory component to my project that, as I describe in Chapter 7 (pp. 112-117), became particularly significant as I conducted the final, validating focus group. I have already said (p. 68) that action research is focussed on practical issues and on real life problems (Coghlan, 2004, pp.99; Graham, 2004, pp. 150-1). In Chapter 6 I outline how, in a first round of data analysis, students' engagement with the canonical voice seemed to be invisible. My engagement with action research provided a solution to this problem. It made me see the significance of the *habitus* that is formed by the internalization of the traditions and practices of the Christian faith. In Chapter 7 (pp. 110-2) I describe how I came to see that students bring the canonical voice into the theologically reflective dialogue by entering into conversation with this internally held *habitus*.

An ethical process

A final characteristic of action research provides a bridge to the second part of this chapter in which there is a shift away from methodology and towards research methods. Because it has a focus on change that is beneficial to all concerned, questions about what counts as improvement are to the fore in action research; these questions involve addressing values and so it is an ethical exercise (Winter, 2014, p. 3). The same is true for theological reflection as the research methodology for this project. Its aim is to serve the wellbeing of researcher, LMC students and tutors, and those interested in the findings by providing insight into threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students. The research and the methods chosen to conduct it need to be 'moral or ethical' just as much as they are 'intellectually coherent and compelling' (Mason, 2002, pp, 41-2). My shift in focus begins, therefore, with an exploration of the ethical issues underlying my choice of research methods.

Ethical issues

'First do no harm'

Two principles underlie an ethical approach to qualitative research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 85). The first is that of 'beneficence' and it states that the research should seek out knowledge and insight that is of value to the participants and to the wider community; it thus has resonance with the aims of both action research and theological reflection. The second is that of 'non-maleficence'. This states that the research should do no harm to its participants and is rooted in the Hippocratic Oath's precept of *primum non nocere* or 'first do no harm'. The danger would be that in seeking to draw out how the students and tutors go about theological reflection, I would cause harm to individual students' interests or dignity. As Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 174) point out, for example, there are times when the interviewing process can be disturbing for participants especially when it involves exploring

‘unwelcome insights into situations or experience’. If such situations were to occur in the focus groups and I considered it inappropriate to deal with them myself, I had colleagues to whom I could direct participants – the LMC chaplain, for example; this gave me confidence that the potential harm could be minimized.

An ethical dilemma

An area of potential harm to the students that was more difficult to deal with concerned a tension between my roles as Principal and researcher. Before conducting the wider fieldwork I sought and gained further ethics permission from Anglia Ruskin University. The process went smoothly but the research proposal submission prompted questions about the power dynamics involved. Part of the LMC Principal’s role is to present a final report to the Bishop recommending whether or not students should be licensed on completion of the LMC programme. How could I be sure that I would not allow what students shared in the focus groups to influence my recommendation? There was a possibility that the gathering of data would do harm to individual students by hindering their progress towards licensing.

As the fieldwork progressed it became clear that the concerns were well-founded. In the focus groups the students shared on a far deeper level than I had anticipated and explored situations and issues that gave cause for concern, raising questions in one case about the student’s suitability for training and subsequent licensing. An ethical dilemma emerged: should I be faithful to my professional role and share what I knew with colleagues or should I maintain an ethical approach to my research and keep the participant’s confidence?

The ethical issue raised here is a pertinent one for research projects on professional doctorate programmes. Where projects concern areas of work that place researchers in positions of power over their participants there will always be the possibility that information shared could cause harm to individuals. My observation, that may or may not prove helpful to those contemplating similar research projects, is that it would have been better to have addressed these issues earlier than I did.

In the event, the particular dilemma was resolved when the participant concerned shared the same issues with colleagues at a training session at which I was not present, and appropriate action was taken without my involvement. It made it clear, however, that assurances I had given the students on the participant information sheets (see Appendix 4 pp. 213-4) that anything they shared would not be prejudicial to their progress towards licensing was not enough. In consultation with colleagues it was agreed that I should not be involved with decisions about suitability for licensing in relation to students who had taken part in the

research. (The workload could be distributed evenly between me and my colleagues because I was able to focus on a particularly large cohort of students who began training in 2013.)

Power dynamics and coercion

The decision meant not only that I could proceed with the rest of the research without worrying that the gathering of my data would do harm to the students: it went some way towards ameliorating concerns that participants would feel coerced or pressurized into participating in the project (Mason, 2002, p. 80). The participant information sheet made it clear that students could withdraw from the study at any time, and provided them with a pro forma to do so if they wished. Now that they knew I was no longer involved in decisions about their licensing they would be more at liberty to take this option (although none of them did). I also assumed that the knowledge that anything they shared would not affect their progress on the programme would make the students less likely to share in the focus groups what they thought I wanted to hear and more likely to say what they really thought about theological reflection. The quality of the data in terms of the students' honesty, and the breadth of topics discussed suggests that this assumption was well founded.

Confidentiality

The confidentiality of the students was respected throughout the research project. Pseudonyms are used in my write up of the research in Chapters 6 and 7 and I have done my best to ensure that only the participants would recognize themselves in what I have written. Consent was obtained from the students who participated in the research (see the consent form in Appendix 5 pp. 215-6). Much of what they told me about in the focus groups concerned third parties, however, whose consent it would not be possible to obtain. I have dealt with this issue by reporting in a way that would make it difficult for these third parties to be identified.

Ethics and the tutor interviews

There were also some ethical considerations to take into account in relation to the tutor interviews. I had to consider whether I was in a position to influence the career development of any of them. One of the tutors was the coordinator of adult education in the diocese and my line manager; another was a retired deputy head teacher who works with the LMC on a voluntary basis. The other four are parish priests and are also volunteers. Although I do not line manage any of them I often discuss their roles with the Bishop and there are occasions when my opinion has been sought in relation to job references. There was potential to do harm to their career prospects.

The issue had to be borne in mind as I conducted the interviews. Care was taken to confine my questions to the tutors' understanding of theological reflection and thresholds in its practice among the students; the nature of the discussion meant that the tutors were not invited to share on the same kind of personal level as the students. The enhancement of theological praxis among the students is a goal I share with the other tutors so we were working as co-researchers with shared objectives; the learning and discussion was two-way as they also questioned me about my developing understanding of the topic. As reported at length in Chapter 7 (pp. 104-6), one tutor saw theological reflection in a way that puzzled and surprised me; far from harming my opinion of the tutor concerned this proved to be decisive in helping me to understand the data gathered from the students. I respected the confidentiality of the tutors and have given them pseudonyms in the write up in Chapter 7.

I also considered whether there was potential for the research to cause harm to me as the researcher. Study at doctoral level and my enhanced understanding of theological reflection and thresholds in its practice had potential to give rise to professional jealousy and thus to harm my own career prospects. This concern was alleviated to some extent by the shared interest that my colleagues had in the project; but I was aware of it throughout and will continue to be so as I disseminate my findings.

The fieldwork

In the rest of this chapter I outline how I conducted fieldwork that was rooted in the methodology and ethical principles I have described. This was done by carrying out focus group interviews with all the students who did not take part in the pilot, conducting individual, semi-structured interviews with the core LMC tutors and doing a final, validating focus group with some students. I go on to describe how I transcribed and coded the data and modified my methods through three 'cycles' of analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

The student focus groups

I chose focus groups as the principal method for working with the students for the reasons set out in Chapter 2 (pp. 17-18) in relation to the pilot study (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007; Cameron and Duce, 2004, pp. 109-120; Morgan, 1997). In addition it represented a good fit with my methodology as outlined in the previous chapter and in my comparison between theological reflection and action research. The focus groups would allow me to work collaboratively with the students providing the opportunity for them to participate in the project (Puchta and Potter, 2004, pp. 47-66) and for me to interact with them (Puchta and Potter, 2004, pp. 2-5; Morgan, 1997, p.15) so that we could develop our understanding of theological reflection.

Thirty students were interviewed (taking the total to thirty-seven including the pilot study – this meant that I had interviewed the whole of the 2012-13 cohort in either the main study or the pilot). I have already provided a breakdown of these students according to education, gender, age and ethnicity in Chapter 1 (pp. 8-9); a table of participants is provided in Appendix 6 (pp. 217-8). The interviews were carried out in year groups. I conducted a focus group with the ten first years in November 2013 at the diocesan education office during a study day. I interviewed fourteen second years in two focus groups during a residential training weekend in November 2013 at a retreat house in Ely. A final group comprised the five students who were in their third year of Reader training; they were interviewed during an evening session at the diocesan education centre in December 2013. Each focus group lasted around ninety minutes.

One second year student was unable to attend the focus group so I interviewed him separately at my home. A first year student became overcome with emotion in the focus group and was unable to continue so I completed my interview with him at his home. Both these interviews took place in November 2013. Interviewing these two students separately created a different kind of dynamic and brought to light some of the relative strengths and weaknesses of focus groups and individual interviews (Morgan, 1997, pp. 10-13; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, pp. 41-5). It made it possible to go into more detail with them but at the same time the interaction of the group was missing and the process felt flatter as a result.

In the case of the student who had become emotional in the original focus group there was a pastoral aspect to our conversation; he was offered the opportunity to talk to the LMC chaplain but he declined. I considered whether the nature of the data gathered from these individual interviews was different in kind from that gathered from the focus groups and should therefore be excluded from the findings. Focus groups and individual interviews can complement each other in qualitative research (Morgan, 1997, pp. 22-3), however, and in order to give a complete picture of the whole student population I opted to include them. Both students clearly identified experience on which to reflect and explored how they correlated it with faith insights.

The questions the students were asked to think about prior to the focus groups were the same as they had been in the pilot study (see pp. 18-21 in Chapter 2; Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, p. 76; Morgan, 1997, pp. 39-42). I invited them to identify a pastoral situation or significant incident in which they had been involved prior to their training, to be prepared to share how they had thought, spoken or acted in that situation and the difference their learning on the programme might have made. This led to a more general discussion on how students

correlate experience and faith insights and the liminality they experience in relation to such praxis.

The tutor interviews

Interviews were carried out with the core team of tutors to provide a rounded description of theological reflection on the LMC. Research into threshold concepts across the disciplines has involved exploring them both among students and lecturers (Barradell, 2013; Shinnars-Kennedy and Fincher, 2013). Although students are able to report on the experience of learning, it is often the case that they have yet to recognize what it is they have to learn, so it may be difficult for threshold concepts to come into view (Barradell, 2013, p. 69). In the case of tutors who may have acquired threshold concepts in a discipline long ago, the difficulty lies in the opposite direction: they may find it difficult to recall what caused blockages in the first place and when and how they negotiated them. In some cases this leads to 'hindsight bias' (Shinnars-Kennedy and Fincher, 2013, p.13) as experts project thresholds back into their retrospective accounts of learning. Researching with both students and tutors would help me to steer a path between these pitfalls.

I considered interviewing the tutors in a further focus group. There was, however, a pre-existing group dynamic to be taken into account (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook, 2007, pp. 28-9). My knowledge of the group suggested that one or two colleagues who are perceived to know more about theological reflection than the others would be likely to dominate in a way that would obscure the views of our colleagues, so I opted for individual, semi-structured interviews (Ayers, 2008; Wengraf, 2001). I began by asking them to define theological reflection and describe their experience of it before asking about their observations of theological reflection among the students and any thresholds in its practice.

The tutors were provided with an information sheet and consent and withdrawal forms in the same way as the students. I conducted six tutor interviews; these were with the Diocesan Director of Training, the LMC Vice-Principal, the LMC Director of Studies, and the coordinators of training for Readers, Lay Pastoral Ministers and Licensed Evangelists. The interviews were conducted between December, 2012 and March, 2013. Each interview lasted around forty-five minutes. I recorded the interviews, listened to them repeatedly, and transcribed them in the way described in the section below on data analysis (pp. 79-80).

Triangulation

I considered whether, following the principle of triangulation (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 60-1; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 195-7), an alternative method should be used to

explore my research question from another perspective. I have access to all the students' written work and on the consent form asked for (and received) their permission to use it in the research. I decided, however, not to use this as a data source. Triangulation can become problematic in qualitative research when different methods or data resources lead to different types or 'levels' of answer (Mason, 2002, pp. 190-1). The focus groups were designed to explore how students correlate faith and experience; in their assignments they had engaged in a completely different, academic kind of exercise. Showing, for example, that students are able to use the pastoral cycle when asked to do so in an essay is not the same thing as exploring in a focus group how they correlate resources from tradition with experiences in their daily lives.

Besides, the individual interviews with tutors already provided an alternative view of theological reflection on the LMC and one which, as I set out in Chapter 7 (pp. 103-6) provided the key to understanding much of the data gathered from the students. By the time I had conducted these and the focus groups, I had a vast amount of data to analyse. I had conducted five focus groups each lasting an hour and a half, two forty minute interviews with individual students and six forty-five minute long interviews with tutors. To gather data from another source would be unnecessary and make the project become too unwieldy and time consuming.

The final focus group

In order to validate my initial findings I conducted a final 'validating' focus group interview. Morgan and Krueger (1993, pp. 9-10) suggest that a 'myth' associated with focus groups is that they must be validated by the use of some other method. My research methodology was inductive all the way through so I continued using a qualitative approach to validate the findings. I therefore dismissed the 'myth' and decided the best form of validation check would be to go back to the students themselves (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 289-331). I conducted the validating focus group with eight of the ten students whom I originally interviewed in November 2012 (the other two had left the programme in the intervening period). It took place as the first session of a training day in May 2014. Six of the participants were about to be licensed as Lay Pastoral Ministers or Licensed Evangelists and two were about to embark on their third year of training as Readers. They were asked to re-visit the situation or encounter they had shared eighteen months earlier before I shared my findings about thresholds in theological reflection with them and asked for their observations.

By this stage the eight students were well into their second year so, besides fulfilling its validating purpose, the final focus group also provided a longitudinal dimension to the research (Morgan, 1997, pp. 68-9; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 266-7). The original interviews provided a cross-sectional view, giving a 'snapshot' of theological reflection on the

LMC at the time they took place. Working with these eight students provided insight into how their practice and understanding had developed over time as they studied on the programme.

The final focus group provided a significant moment for me as researcher. The data analysis that preceded it was a solitary exercise: I now had the opportunity to work collaboratively once again with the students in order to enhance and transform the way we go about theological reflection. The enthusiasm with which the students participated in this final group was extremely gratifying. I had planned for it to last for ninety minutes but the lively discussion meant that we overran and took up twenty minutes of what was supposed to be a coffee break. The way in which the discussion led me to amend and develop my findings is summarized in Chapter 7 (pp. 112-17).

Data analysis

A first cycle of analysis

Once I had gathered the data I conducted three ‘cycles’ of analysis (Saldaña, 2013, p. 59). In the pilot study I transcribed the focus group recording in full. This gave me a good knowledge of the discussion but was extremely time-consuming (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 538-9). To conduct the first cycle of analysis I took a different approach. In the wider fieldwork I used a digital recorder; this gave a very high level of recording to which I listened repeatedly. The advantage of this was that it maintained nuances of tone and expression in a way that helped me to relive the interviews.

As I listened I began to code the data. I considered whether the process would be aided by using a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) package but I decided that if I were to do so my intellectual energy would be likely to be absorbed in learning how to use the software rather than in engaging with and interpreting the data (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 25-30; Mason, 2002, pp. 151-2, 164-5). I further felt that I would have a greater sense of engagement with and ownership of the material by using a ‘pencil and paper approach’, moving sets of data around manually, and modifying my codes as patterns began to emerge. Thus, as I listened to the recordings, I noted topics that kept recurring on sheets of A3 paper. I transcribed in full sections of the recordings that I judged to be particularly significant and cross-referenced them with my paper notes.

I had hoped that the analysis would help me to identify students’ engagement with the ‘voices’ in the mutually critical dialogue represented by the models of theological reflection as set out in Chapter 4. A danger inherent in the coding process is that, when codes are decided in advance, they will impose a pattern on the findings rather than allowing insight to emerge (Saldaña, 2013,

pp. 38-4). In my first cycle of analysis this is precisely what happened. As I show in Chapter 6 (p. 89-90), the data did not fit neatly into the framework of the mutually critical conversation and there were large amounts of material left over. A pivotal point came when I analysed the data gathered from the tutors. As I show in Chapter 7 this helped me to recognize how the left over data could be used to provide insight into how LMC students negotiate thresholds in theological reflection. It provided the impetus for a second round of data analysis.

Second and third rounds of data analysis

I listened to the focus group recordings again in light of what I had learnt from analysing the tutor interviews. It became clear that transcribing small chunks of data and allocating them with preordinate codes relating to the various reflective voices had divorced them from their context. In trying to fit the data into the framework I had strayed into working deductively. I made the decision to produce a far fuller transcript of the focus group recordings. In this transcript I wrote a précis of those parts of the recordings that seemed less relevant or where we had strayed off the point, and transcribed the rest in full. A second round of coding categorized all the data, even those parts that were awkward or did not fit in with my initial framework. The result was that a more faithful account emerged from the data.

As I set out in Chapter 6, the reflective voices identified in Chapter 4 continued to be important. Now, however, as I show in Chapter 7, the spiritual, holistic, dispositional and participative aspects that give theological reflection resonance with action research took on significance. I explored these findings in the final focus group and then conducted a final cycle of analysis taking into account the observations of the students.

Conclusion

By the time I had gathered and analysed the data, I was beginning to understand my own theological reflection and that of the students and tutors more clearly. It had taken me on my own journey into liminal space and towards identifying some thresholds in its practice. In the next two chapters I continue to narrate the story of my journey as I move away from research design and analysis and onto my findings.

Chapter 6 – Listening to the Conversation

Introduction

In this chapter I summarise what I found in my first cycle of data analysis. I begin with a brief interlude in which I reflect on a biblical theme and the end of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to introduce my findings. I move on to construct a model of liminality and learning in theological reflection (see Figure 6.1 on p. 83), relating it to the fieldwork and identifying three threshold concepts in students' practice of theological reflection. I conclude by drawing attention to some limitations to these findings, not least the fact that they only relate to data gathered from a minority of the students. I describe in Chapter 7 how subsequent analysis enabled me to interpret the remainder of the data and deepen my understanding of theological reflection on the LMC.

Reflective interlude

In either hand the hastening angel caught
Our lingring Parents, and to th' Eastern Gate
Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
To the subjected Plaine; then disappeer'd.
They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,
Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie Armes:
Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.
(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.637-649.)

Meyer and Land reflect on the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden to convey the idea of threshold concepts (2006a, p. xiv). In so doing they draw on a medieval painting by the Brothers Limbourg. To introduce the summary of my findings I have chosen to reflect on the same biblical theme, but as mediated by the concluding passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It encapsulates well what I found among the tutors and students, but also the way in which I crossed a further threshold as I gathered and analysed the data.

Our 'parents' stand on the plain and look back at paradise 'so late thir happie seat'. As they do so they shed some 'natural tears', mindful of what has been lost. They have tasted from the tree of knowledge; their innocence is gone; they must face the consequences of life beyond Eden. There is no going back; 'that flaming brand' bars the way. I brought a certain innocence to the research. For some reason LMC students seemed to lack either appetite or aptitude for theological reflection; all I had to do was identify what that 'something' was, put it right, and all

would be well. During the fieldwork I tasted from the tree of knowledge. The difficulty, I found, was not so much with the students as with me. I shed some ‘natural tears’ for lost innocence.

Not that all is lost. Our ancestors’ tears are soon wiped and they face a world that is ‘all before them’. They have learnt; the possibilities are endless. A new understanding of theological reflection stands before me, too. The fieldwork not only revealed things about my own praxis; it also uncovered some threshold concepts in the students’ theological reflection. Mine is not quite a ‘solitary way’; ‘hand in hand’ with the students and tutors ‘with wand’ring steps and slow’ I move towards a renewed way of thinking about and doing theological reflection. In the next two chapters I narrate how my findings led me in the direction of that renewed understanding

Constructing a model

An idealized conversation

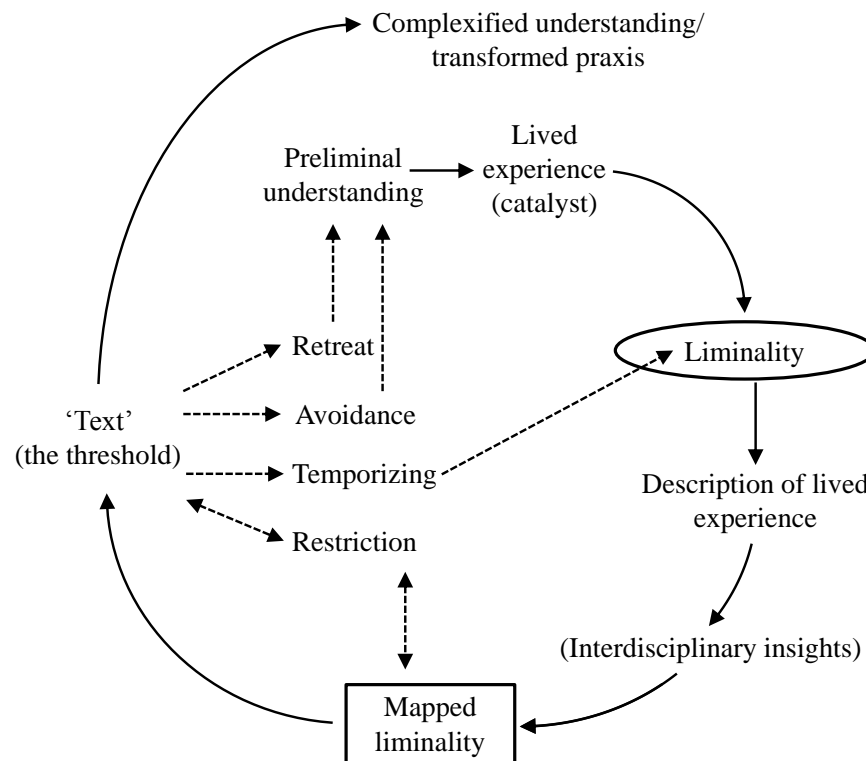
I begin by drawing on Savin-Baden’s (2008) model of transitional learning spaces (see Figure 3.3 on p. 47) to construct a conversational model of liminality and learning in theological reflection (see Figure 6.1 on p. 83). It is, of course, only a model and as such the limitations outlined in Chapter 4 (p. 61) apply; it is a simplification that reflects a more complex reality and it does so imperfectly. I use it to convey the complex reality of my findings and to introduce the themes that will be central to this chapter.

The outer cycle in Figure 6.1 (p. 83) represents a version of the pastoral or experiential learning cycle and is an idealized view of how the mutually critical dialogue might progress. The starting point is preliminal space. A student then experiences a critical incident or pastoral encounter. This serves as a trigger or catalyst taking the student into liminal space. They are neither here nor there, betwixt and between realizing that their previous understanding will no longer do and the renewed or transformed understanding or praxis that is the outcome of the reflection. Once in the liminal space the student employs the ethnographic voice as they provide a thick description of the experience. At this point the student may draw on insights from non-theological disciplines to enhance their description and there is potential for the praxis voice to come into play as they enter into a critique of their own practices and identify injustices inherent within the situation.

This brings the student doing the reflecting to the position at the bottom of the figure 6.1 (p.83) at which they have mapped the liminal space. This mapped liminality is then brought into dialogue with a ‘text’ and the canonical voice is drawn into the conversation. I use ‘text’ in a

broad sense here – often the text concerned is the Bible but it sometimes refers to other traditional resources. Thus the text serves as a threshold or portal leading to a complexified understanding of the situation and/or transformed praxis.

Figure 6.1 – A conversational model of liminality and learning in theological reflection



Dysfunctional strategies

The pre-understanding I brought to the fieldwork, however, together with my own experience and the findings from the pilot study, led me to anticipate that the reflective conversation would rarely progress unhindered through this idealized cycle. Students would be likely to become stuck in the liminal space. When I had gathered the data and completed my first cycle of analysis I was able to develop the diagram in Figure 6.1 to explain such stuck-ness. As this chapter unfolds I show how this development is expressed by the categories in the centre of the diagram.

I found that the students responded in different ways to the disjunction that arose between text and experience. Some appeared to be at ease with using the text as a portal leading to transformed praxis. Others, however, adopted dysfunctional 'strategies' that short-circuited the conversation. These 'strategies' are not necessarily purposeful ways of dealing with disjunction; they may be adopted either consciously or unconsciously (Savin-Baden, 2006, p.

164; 2008, p. 83). I identified four such strategies. They are, first, the strategy of *restriction* in which students limited the scope of theological reflection; second, the strategy of *retreat* (Perry 1999 [1970], pp. 204-212; Savin-Baden, 2006, pp. 164-5; 2008, p.81) in which engagement with the text caused them to return to their preliminal understanding; third the strategy of *avoidance* (Perry, 1999 [1970], pp. 212-221; Savin-Baden, 2006, pp. 164-5; 2008, p.81) in which students found ways of circumventing problematic engagements with the text; and, finally the strategy of temporizing (Perry, 1999 [1970], pp. 199-203; Savin-Baden, 2006, pp. 164; 2008, p.81) in which they found ways of coping with an extended stay in the liminal space.

Three threshold concepts

In the first round of data analysis I identified three threshold concepts that remove the short-circuits associated with the dysfunctional strategies. The strategy of restriction is dealt with when students negotiate what I call the *pervasive* threshold concept; the strategy of retreat is removed when the *interpretive* threshold concept is crossed; and strategies of avoidance and temporizing no longer short-circuit the conversation when students negotiate the *complexifying* threshold concept. In what follows I look at each of these threshold concepts in turn. In each case I present data to show how students either engaged in the reflective conversation or employed the dysfunctional strategies associated with the threshold concept as outlined above. I then develop the argument by relating the threshold concept concerned to Meyer and Land's (2003) characteristics. In Chapter 7 I develop the conversational model further to include the 'living human document' as I attend to the subjective voice in the reflective dialogue (see Figure 7.1 on page 107).

The pervasive threshold concept

Students negotiate the pervasive threshold concept when they recognize that theological reflection's relevance pervades the full range of human experiences and draws on resources from across the disciplines to provide a rich description. In this section I describe how the threshold concept emerged as I attended to the ethnographic voice in the reflective conversation and found that students adopted the strategy of restriction.

Identifying experience

In the focus groups, students reflected on a range of topics. Fourteen of them chose to describe experiences that were related to pastoral situations either at church or at work. Ten described encounters or situations involving close family or friends. Three spoke about personal crises, two narrated religious experiences, and one reflected on her reactions to an ethical issue raised by a radio programme. Five of the participants commented that they had struggled to think of

any experience on which to reflect, and two of them came to the group without having identified anything at all. My initial impression was that the latter two students especially had failed to negotiate a possible threshold that I identified when I was exploring the ethnographic voice in Chapter 4 (p. 54-5); namely that insight is likely to emerge from a careful description of experience; my supposition was that they had failed to see clearly or pay adequate attention to experience (Bennett, 2013, pp. 81-7; Leach 2007). Closer attention to the data suggested, however, that the problem lay with the questions I had asked in the information sheet, or at least with the students' interpretation of them. Once the focus groups got going and they had heard what others had to say they were all able to describe a situation, encounter or experience.

Describing experience

Once appropriate experience had been identified, the recounting of it was significant in enabling students to map out their inchoate understanding of it. Something had triggered their interest or made them feel uncomfortable, causing them to move into liminal space (Cameron et al, 2012, pp. 16-26). Now as they retold what had happened they began to give some shape to it so that they could begin to negotiate the liminal space. Students recognized the importance of paying attention to the affective aspects of the reflective process (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985, pp. 19-21) and were prepared to re-enter their experience in order to move towards insight (Killen and de Beer, 1994, pp. 22-35). One second year student, for example, gave voice to her strong feelings of anger towards someone who had abused a family member and it gave her insight into her actions; in the first year focus group another relived the trepidation he felt when he visited a family grieving the loss of a toddler and began to see how it had shaped his approach to bereavement visiting; and when a third participant, another first year, recounted the vivid sensations that accompanied a vision in church, it enabled her to explore its significance with the group.

My observation, then, is that experience triggers movement into a liminal space because students are aware that it has potential to provide insight or understanding but they have yet to explore the shape such insight or understanding might take. Once in the liminal space students shape or map out the experience prior to bringing it into a dialogue with resources from tradition. This gives the description of experience resonance with the role played by the 'sciences of the social' in Boff's (1987) epistemology of liberation theology as I described it in Chapter 4 (p. 57-8). Prior to theological or traditional insights being brought into the conversation, the experience is provided with its 'contours' (Bennett, 2007, p.43) by a careful description. In this way insight emerges from human experience, the ethnographic voice is brought into the dialogue, and students reach the position of mapped liminality at the bottom of Figure 6.1 (p.83).

The strategy of restriction

For some students, however, theological reflection was restricted to certain kinds of experience. Jeff, a second year student was one of those who could not initially think of any experience on which to reflect. He told me twice before the focus group and once at its outset that he was having difficulty and it is the reason that he gave for this that is of interest. Even though I tried to make it clear that an experience from any sphere of life would be suitable, he was adamant that, as he was yet to be licensed as a lay minister, he had to date not had an appropriate experience. In the event he engaged in some effective reflection on his experience of a humanist funeral. His initial response, however, portrays well the strategy of restricted theological reflection: some experiences are suitable for theological reflection and others are not.

Harriet, was another of those who had difficulty in identifying something to reflect on, but in her case, as the following extract¹ shows, the problem was not with a lack of possibilities:

I don't have anything that comes to mind – there are so many things that – I'm just going round thinking: that, that – but actually everything's different but [in my professional role] anyway I suppose I'm into lots of amazing situations [...] I could tell you lots of different amazing things and I would do but it's difficult to start saying where I would have done things differently because I come from a different place and I've been more trained to listen to people and understand what's going on and see where they are.

One of the more academically qualified and competent LMC students, Harriet demonstrated that she was able to correlate biblical texts with experience in a sophisticated way. When one of her peers was talking about a difficult situation involving his parents, she identified texts from the gospels and used them to provide insight into family relationships. She sees such theological reflection as having limited use in her professional role, however:

For me it's because I deal with situations of that type all the time and I've been trained to deal with it in a [professional] way and that's always worked. Pastoral theology has slightly changed how I deal with things [...] and as I become more of a kind of minister rather than a [professional] the way I talk to people is different because I'm bringing Jesus into it and prayer in a way I can't do at work.

¹ In this and the following excerpt I have avoided stating Harriet's profession in order to preserve her anonymity.

Harriet has a tried and tested way of dealing with the situations she encounters at work so her learning about pastoral theology is mainly relevant to another discrete area of her life as she continues her training and becomes ‘more of a kind of minister’. Learning about theological reflection would be useful once she was licensed and working as a Reader in her church, but it was not something she saw as being applicable to her work. In the end Harriet decided to tell the focus group about a situation in her family. It was a pity. Whilst it might not be appropriate to be explicit about her faith with clients, some of her work experiences might prove to be rich ground for theological reflection provided that she were able to protect clients’ anonymity.

In a typology of adult ways of believing, Le Cornu (2005) identifies a position she calls ‘discrete believing’ in which people hold faith and experience in two discrete areas of their lives. Initially I thought of labelling what I was observing among these students ‘the strategy of discreteness’. In the light of closer attention both to my data and Le Cornu’s category I decided that this would be confusing. Le Cornu refers to an epistemological inability to correlate experience with Christian belief. This is not quite what I was observing. It was rather that students consciously or unconsciously failed to see the relevance of faith resources to certain kinds of experience. They were restricting the scope of theological reflection. Thus liminality is related to some areas of life but, while it may be mapped by description and analysis, it is not engaged with the text at all. It is indicated in Figure 6.1 (p. 83) by the dotted arrows leading between mapped liminality and the text.

Praxis: a half heard voice

The students also restricted their theological reflection in another direction. As they recounted their experience they paid attention to their praxis. Keith, for example, whose story I outline in detail below (pp. 92-3), was critical of the way he had acted towards his friends; a third year student entered into a critique of the pastoral care she offered to a child whose father became terminally ill. In such cases attention was paid to how the student concerned could have acted more wisely and efficiently in the situation. In this way the reflective practice aspect of the praxis voice as I described it in Chapter 4 (p. 57) was brought into the reflective conversation.

The students did not bring the liberative dimension of the praxis voice into the conversation, however. Chapter 4’s exploration of liberation theology (pp. 57-8) suggests a stage in the conversation in which insights from the social sciences or other disciplines are employed to provide a further mapping of the liminality that has been triggered by experience. Indeed Boff (1987, pp. 51-62) would argue that the analysis offered by the sciences of the social is necessary if ideological distortion is to be avoided and praxis is to be transformed. In the third year focus group, a student said that her professional training helped her to interpret her experiences at

work. In the same group, another participant spoke briefly about how sociology had informed the way he had mapped his experience. Apart from that, attempts to draw insights from other disciplines into the theologically reflective dialogue were strikingly absent from the student focus groups (that is why the stage of ‘interdisciplinary insights’ is in brackets in Figure 6.1 on p. 83).

This means that the voice represented by the praxis model of theological reflection was only half heard. Typically students were able to enter into a critique of their own practice but a multi-disciplinary approach leading to a social, political or economic critique was absent. The potential for the transformation of unjust practices was thus greatly reduced. The pastoral cycle’s roots in experiential learning were reflected in what the students shared, but its origins in liberation theology were not. As I show in my concluding chapter, insights from educational theory helped to provide the contours of my exploration of the LMC in this thesis; such insights from other disciplines did not seem to shape students’ reflection to any significant degree in the focus group interviews.

Identifying the pervasive threshold concept

Thus students restricted the scope of theological reflection, first, by limiting the kinds of experience on which they reflected and, second, by not bringing interdisciplinary insights into the conversation. This led me to identify the pervasive threshold concept in theological reflection among LMC students. As Adam and Eve leave Paradise the world is ‘all before them’. All of experience provides potential material for theological reflection and insights from the full range of disciplines have potential to map the contours of the realities being explored. Theological reflection is pervasive both in its relevance and its resources.

Discussing the pervasive threshold concept

The pervasive threshold concept demonstrates some of the characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 (pp. 30-7; Meyer and Land 2003). It is *transformative*. Restricted theological reflection short-circuits the reflective conversation because some experiences are not brought into dialogue with the resources of faith. This short-circuit is removed when the pervasive nature of theological reflection is understood. Thus Jeff’s understanding is transformed if he recognizes that a reflective conversation has potential to provide insight beyond ministerial practice, as is Harriet’s if she comes to see that faith insights have potential to illuminate her professional life. The recognition that insights from across the disciplines have potential to offer a critique of current practices and uncover injustices has equal potential to be transformative.

The pervasive threshold concept is by its very nature *integrative*; and it also has something to say about *bounded-ness*, the implication being that theological reflection is *boundless*. There are no subject areas that cannot be reflected on theologically and no insights that cannot be drawn into the dialogue. As Aquinas (ST I.1.7) would have it *omnia pertractantur in sacra sub ratione dei*; in sacred science all things are considered under the aspect of God.

For Harriet to see theological reflection as an alternative to her tried and trusted way of thinking about her professional practice is likely to be counterintuitive and, therefore, *troublesome*. This brings into question the extent to which the transformation is likely to be *irreversible*. For the conversation between text and experience to permeate every dimension of life is energy sapping and there are instances where students are likely to be reluctant to use theological reflection alongside other tried and trusted methods.

At this point a return to the analogy of learning to swim is helpful (see Chapter 2, pp. 24-5). Just because I can swim does not mean that I always must. The water may be too cold, I may be too tired, I may just have eaten, or may simply be too lazy. I might choose an altogether different method of enjoying the water and paddle around in a rubber dinghy. My choice not to go swimming, however, does not mean I have forgotten how to swim; that change is irreversible; throw me in at the deep end and, instinctively, I will swim. The same is true for LMC students; once they have crossed the pervasive threshold the change is irreversible. Just because they have come to see all of experience as being potential material for theological reflection, however, does not mean to say that they will bring a particular experience into conversation with tradition. Some experiences will not seem significant enough; sometimes there will be constraints of time or energy; but none of these mean that students have forgotten how to reflect theologically.

The interpretive threshold concept

The interpretive threshold concept is crossed once students recognise that traditional sources need to be interpreted anew in each and every context. It emerged during my first round of data analysis as I attended to the canonical voice, explored how students brought traditional texts into the reflective conversation, and found that some students adopted a dysfunctional strategy of retreat.

Attending to the text

My exploration of how students employed the canonical voice presented a problem. It appeared that fewer than half of them had purposefully engaged directly in a self-conscious way with traditional texts. In subsequent cycles of analysis I reassessed my understanding of how the

majority had brought faith insights into the reflective dialogue; I outline this reassessment in Chapter 7. Here I focus on the twelve whom I judged to have brought scripture and/or other texts into conversation with experience. I set out how they approached the text in different ways. For some, the text itself was the trigger for reflection; others seemed to be at ease with using it as a portal to renewed understanding while some of their peers struggled because of the disjunction between text and experience or found themselves wrestling with the text; finally, four students saw the meaning of the text as being fixed and generalizable.

The text as a trigger for reflection

My assumption, based on my own experience, was that the apparent lack of engagement with traditional texts was because the students found the juxtaposition of faith and experience troublesome (Cameron et al., 2012, pp. 81-6). This clearly was the case for some. For them the troublesome nature of the text was itself the experience that triggered theological reflection. The following extract shows how, for Lorette, a second year student, the Bible ‘lost its magic’ during her first year on the programme:

I found that last year [...] the Bible lost its magic. My daily discipline included reading the Bible [...] and I loved it. I was one of them people that I opened the Bible randomly [...] and God would give me the answer. It made me feel better or it just directed me to do something and it stopped doing that for some reason. And I don’t know whether it was because I was starting to think about it in a different way, starting to study it in a different way. But there was just this time when the Bible had gone cold – I was just reading it to do with the course [...] but it did come back.

A closer engagement with the text had taken this student into liminal space. She no longer found her approach to scripture tenable. The Bible had become, in her words, ‘cold’. There is resonance here with the rich man of Mark’s gospel (10.17-27, see Chapter 3, pp. 28-37); negotiation of thresholds in theological reflection comes at a cost. Lorette went on to describe how it had taken her time to rediscover the Bible in a deeper, more nuanced way and recover the sense that it could illuminate experience.

For a second student, Anna, study on the programme had been even more difficult. Someone who had come to faith relatively recently, she outlined how she had even considered not returning for the second year:

I just personally struggled with the whole of the first year. But I came back. I really believe this is where God’s called me to be. [...]. It’s not to say it didn’t give me stuff to reflect on; it did. It’s just there was stuff I was really challenged with and I really didn’t like.

It was not that the course failed to provide Anna with material on which to reflect; it was rather that the curriculum had made her engage with the Bible and other texts in a way that was challenging and brought up issues she would rather not have had to face. I asked whether now, with the benefit of hindsight, it had been helpful to be shaken up in this way. She said that a better way of putting it would be to say that she had ‘grown’ during her twelve months on the LMC. She concluded that she was now ‘where God wanted her to be’ and it had all ultimately been positive, but that it had been ‘like rowing against the storm’ and it had been difficult to keep her ‘little boat going in the same direction’.

The text as a portal

Other students appeared to be able to use traditional texts as portals to renewed understanding or transformed practice from the outset. An example is provided by Gina, a first year who was interviewed only six weeks into the programme. Gina reflected on her role as a school governor and visitor using the image of Jesus as the light of the world (John 8.12) to explore how she and her colleague had been able to illuminate what was going on in a struggling primary school. She also drew on a theological text (Chadwick and Tovey, 2003) to describe how she had reflected theologically on the situation. She showed an understanding of hermeneutical issues, too, recognizing the need to be ‘aware of author, purpose, personal bias and genre when examining scripture’. Gina developed her approach to theological reflection during her time on the course: in the final focus group she described how she had learnt to weave Ignatian spirituality into her practice of theological reflection.

For Paul, a second year student, the trigger for reflection had been the terminal illness, death and funeral of an atheist family member. Paul identified John 11.58 where Jesus weeps at the news of the death of Lazarus as a scriptural source for reflection on the experience. He had brought this into dialogue with a text from the LMC doctrine module in which Astley (2010, pp. 155-178) uses the image of ‘God in the mud’ to explore divine activity in the world and on Moltmann’s (1974) concept of ‘Godforsaken-ness’ to discern God’s presence in the experience. In the following passage Paul describes how this had affirmed a developing vocation to work with the terminally ill and the bereaved:

To me one of the key passages in the Bible is ‘Jesus wept’ with Lazarus there. I think we have a God who does suffer when we suffer and he’s there with people who don’t believe, um, with the atheists; he’s there with the people who need him most and very often they’re the people who have rejected him and I think the course has just strengthened my view there. Um, I feel very much I’ve got a calling towards working with the bereaved and the suffering; those who are down in the mud. I don’t really quite know why but I feel that’s my ministry there.

Wrestling with the text

Other students recognized that theological reflection was more problematic. A second year student whom I will call Keith had a reputation among his peers and the tutors for taking a conservative approach to the relationship between experience and tradition. He had to wrestle with conflicting texts to renew his understanding and inform his practice. The following extract shows the extent to which the LMC programme had challenged him:

What the course has done for me is it's challenged me at almost every point, really. Um, thus far, um, as most of you will know by now, I tend towards the view that you take the orthodox position on everything, and it's very, very challenging this course all the time, both in terms of what tutors say to you, and in terms of what we say to one another for example in this group.

The challenge found its focus in his relationship with two gay men who had attended his church. The two had left the church because they felt they could no longer worship there given the national Church of England's stance on sexuality. As Keith related the story it did not seem that he had much reason to reproach himself: on the suggestion of the vicar he had organized a collection to buy the gay couple a leaving present. He was still unhappy, however, with the way he had been towards them. Initially I misunderstood the reason for his discomfort and I asked whether the difficulty had arisen because his faith told him one thing while his experience of friendship with the gay couple told him another. Here is his reply:

No, Quentin, that's not what I'm saying. I never knew quite how I should be, entirely, with them, going back, um, because scripture told me – I'd got mixed messages – because of my, um, my shortcomings, I took mixed messages from scripture and tradition. On the one hand homosexuality was wrong, and on the other hand you should love one another and that's hard; that's a hard place to be because I was always ambivalent about that. I'm not saying that that necessarily showed in how I behaved towards those two men because I don't think it did; I don't think they ever had any arguments with me. But I know what's going on inside me you understand. I know how I felt, the ambivalent sense of it all. And I think coming on the course has helped me to realize that, um, I needed to be – what shall we say – rather more generous in my outlook towards them.

The difficulty, then, was due to an internal ambivalence based on his contradictory understanding of various biblical sources. There were clear resonances with some of my own earlier struggles to correlate experience with scripture as laid out in Chapter 1 (p. 5-6). The student described it as a 'hard place to be' – he was in a liminal place in relation to the issue. He was clear, however, that he wanted to be 'more generous' towards the couple in the hope that they would return to church and his friendship with them could be resumed.

Once again theological reflection for this student was proving costly. There was a sense that he would remain in a 'hard place' but he had come to see that scripture was not as clear as he had once taken it to be. Perhaps, to adapt the poetry of Milton, 'natural tears' of frustration were dropped, but all was very much before him. He recognized that he has 'not always got everything sorted right'; scripture, in other words, is interpreted, and at the time of the focus group he was wrestling with the text in a way that gave him some room for manoeuvre in regard to sexual ethics and his relationship with the gay couple. My interpretation was that this was someone who was very much engaged in a conversation at the threshold whose struggle was leading to transformation of understanding and practice.

When text and experience are 'out of kilter'

Other students found theological reflection troublesome because the text and experience were taken to constitute opposing partners in the conversation. The canonical and ethnographic voices were in conflict. This was most clearly seen in a lengthy exchange in one of the second year focus groups on the issue of divorce and remarriage. Three members of the group spoke about their first-hand experience of the issue. They each said that study on the LMC programme had helped them to reflect on their experience. They maintained the sense, however, that, as one of them put it, their experience was 'out of kilter with the Bible'. For one of them this meant that it was difficult if not impossible to contemplate remarriage after divorce because to do so would be to 'commit adultery'. Another student agreed that this was the 'biblical' position and was even more deeply troubled by what he understood to be the Church of England's view on ordination of those who are separated or divorced. He saw a level of inconsistency that he found painful. The third student took a more nuanced view, understanding the interpreted nature of the texts concerned, but seemed to be equally troubled.

Experience, then, had led these students into liminal space in which they sought to gain understanding of separation and divorce. In this situation, however, far from providing a way through the liminality, the texts seemed to compound their sense of disjunction and led to a degree of stuck-ness that prevented them from moving on to a place where the same texts could serve as portals to greater understanding or renewed praxis.

A fixed, generalizable meaning

Four students saw the meaning of biblical texts as being relatively fixed and generalizable across contexts and cultures. One of the four, a second year, serves as an example; here, I call him Phil. Like Keith whose wrestling with the text I outlined above, Phil reflected on a situation that involved issues of sexuality. Some years previously he had led a youth camp at

which one young man was alleged to have made sexual advances towards another. Phil told the group that he had dealt with it ‘from the Bible’, citing 1 Corinthians 6 to suggest that sexual immorality involves ‘sinning against the body’ and that it is a ‘different kind of sin from other sins’. He made the decision to send the young man about whom the allegation had been made home. In the following extract he says that he would still stand by his actions:

Reflecting on it from what I’ve done in the course now I think I would still deal with it in the same way. I’ve done the ethics module and nothing that was presented there particularly made me change my mind. Although if I was inclined to believe everything that was said there then, um, maybe I might change my mind but I didn’t find that was the outcome of listening to it all. [...] No I still find that taken over all that the way I’ve always viewed it – which is sort of the conservative way – seems to me the best. It gives you a measure, it gives you focus and it stops you from sitting on the fence. Like in James where it talks about don’t be double-minded about things, I think in the end it’s important to make decisions, be single-minded about things rather than being thrown around by all sorts of different views.

Phil’s biblical studies on the LMC had not helped him to see that texts, especially ones as contestable as 1 Corinthians 6, are open to interpretation and that dealing with it ‘from the Bible’ might well lead, if not to a different course of action, at least to an alternative understanding. The LMC module on ethics had recently presented him with an alternative approach but he had not found it satisfactory. He saw his method as providing clarity and focus and as being the best model for theological reflection.

Phil’s comments prompted discussion in the second year focus group in which he was a participant about when and how it is possible or necessary to, as one student put it, ‘come to a view’ in theological reflection. Two group members agreed with Phil about the relatively fixed, generalizable nature of biblical texts. Here, Graham stresses the importance of being single-minded in the face of multiple perspectives:

Yeah, I think the point you make, Phil, about having lots and lots of ideas but being single-minded is important because there comes a point where I think we do have to take a view and make up our minds what we believe; not just for ourselves but for others to learn and get something about the faith.

Graham went on to express frustration at what he perceived to be the Church of England’s failure to take a ‘single-minded’ approach:

For me it's a problem with the Church of England that it won't actually (*claps his hands to express frustration*) do that and take a view about anything and it attempts to be so flipping reasonable it doesn't take a view!

Two other members of the group, however, saw the importance of interpreting the text anew according to context. Here, Joan responds to Graham, and sees that it is possible for there to be growth and development in interpretation:

But sometimes it's not a question of changing it's a question of developing, you know, you've got a viewpoint but it's possible to grow and develop.

The strategy of retreat

Phil holds his position with some integrity, but viewed from the perspective of the mutually critical conversation it is problematic. There are resonances with my discussion in Chapter 5 (pp. 68-70) about whether the fruits of action research or theological reflection can reshape tradition (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp. 254-9; Graham, 2013, pp. 158-64). Phil's argument would be that they cannot. The canonical voice is thus privileged so that it forecloses on the conversation and the other voices are obscured. It results in the reflective process being short-circuited as the student's foray into liminal space ends with a return to his prior understanding of experience without further insight. That is why, following Perry (1999 [1970], pp. 204-212) and Savin-Baden (2006, pp. 164-5; 2008, p.81) I call it the strategy of retreat. It results in a return to the position of preliminal understanding as indicated by the dotted arrows in Figure 6.1 (p. 83).

Identifying the interpretive threshold concept

The short-circuit that results from the dysfunctional strategy of retreat is removed when students negotiate the interpretive threshold concept. In order for students to use the text as a portal to understanding they need to conceptualize it as being open to interpretation or reinterpretation in each and every context. The meaning of texts is not fixed or generalizable; regarding them as such would privilege them over the other partners and foreclose on the conversation. One of the areas I suspected I might find a threshold concept in theological reflection proved fruitful (see Chapter 4, p. 53); recognition of the contextual, interpreted nature of texts is a portal students need to negotiate in order to practise theological reflection as a mutually critical dialogue.

Discussing the interpretive threshold concept

The interpretive threshold concept can be mapped on to Meyer and Land's (2003) five characteristics as outlined in Chapter 3 (pp. 30-7). It is *transformative*. If the text is regarded as having a fixed, supra-contextual meaning it forms a short-circuit as suggested in Figure 6.1

(p.83). Recognition that texts are interpreted removes the short-circuit and facilitates a mutually critical conversation with experience leading to transformed understanding or praxis. Keith's recognition of the interpreted nature of texts provided space for him to transform the way he understood his friends' relationship, but Phil's approach to sexuality remained the same despite his experience in the ethics module.

Negotiation of the interpretive threshold concept has potential to be *integrative*: where experience or insights from other disciplines are at odds with the text there is the possibility of reinterpretation and room for manoeuvre. This, of course, is precisely what worried Phil and the other three students who saw the meaning of texts as being relatively fixed, and they pointed to the danger that the distinctive voice of scripture would be silenced.

There is a further risk, moreover, that the quest for integration will tempt students to jump to a false synthesis between experience and faith insights; this may have been the case with students like Gina and Paul (p. 91) who seemed to be at ease with using the text as a portal. There are two ways of interpreting such theological reflection. The outcome could be seen as revised praxis in the light of a dialogue between experience and the canonical voice. Alternatively attention could be drawn to what is not being addressed in the conversation. What do biblical texts or traditional resources have to say to Paul about salvation for atheist family members? Are there some more troublesome questions to be asked? Has an artificial synthesis been reached too soon? It is all very well for Gina to talk about 'the light of the world' providing insight into what is happening in a struggling school; but how does this help when the head teacher needs to balance pastoral care for her staff with the need for improved performance in the wake of a poor Ofsted report? Does the student's theological reflection go beyond mere mimicry of her tutors?

The data gathered from the students for whom the text served as a trigger for reflection shows that the negotiation of the threshold is likely to be *troublesome* and, as I show in the discussion on avoidance and temporizing below, the temptation to return to earlier, less complex ways of understanding traditional texts is likely to be ever-present. The second year students who discussed divorce and remarriage also found interpretation and reinterpretation of the text troublesome. When students regard scripture as the inspired word of God, negotiation of the interpretive threshold is likely to be even more problematic as it seems to challenge a basic tenet of faith. An implication of this is that Conservative Evangelical students are likely to struggle with it more than others. This was not supported by my findings, however. Both Phil and Keith are Conservative Evangelicals; one had a fixed view of scripture while the other wrestled with a dynamic within scripture in a way that illuminated his experience. It may be that a more

significant threshold for Conservative Evangelicals is a willingness to live with complexity and uncertainty, a possibility I discuss in the next section (pp. 98-102).

The extent to which the interpretive threshold concept is *irreversible* is a significant issue. It can be related to the work of Perry (1999 [1970]) and other developmental theorists (Fowler, 1981). This associates it with movement from early positions in which dualistic right/wrong ways of thinking hold sway to later positions in which a relativistic worldview is adopted. The implication is that it is associated with progressive movement to a stage of greater maturity that is irreversible. This was an assumption I brought to the fieldwork.

It was challenged when, shortly after I began analysing the data, I visited the Anglican Diocese of Seoul, South Korea to advise colleagues there on establishing a lay training programme similar to the LMC. Difficulties arose because my Korean colleagues did not share my assumptions. I was reminded that mine is a very Western way of thinking; it valorises relativism. In the Korean context acceptance of the authority carried by such figures as bishops as well as that of scripture and tradition is seen as a sign of maturity. Viewed from this perspective it could be argued that the interpretive threshold concept needs to be negotiated in reverse; the acceptance of the authority of a single interpretation of traditional sources would be the way to effective theological reflection. My interpretation, then, is limited by my own cultural horizons and even within my context students like Phil would attach a greater significance to the role of authority in theological reflection. My data might be interpreted very differently by Phil, my South Korean colleagues or, for example, monastic communities in which obedience is valued (Leclercq, 1978).

To return again to my swimming analogy there are those who would be concerned about dangerous undercurrents and would be more ready than others to put up signs saying 'No Swimming'. Some students might be quite happy to enjoy swimming in a purpose built pool but unwilling to risk the dangers of a river or the sea. This is not to say that they have forgotten how to swim – it is rather that people erect 'No Swimming' signs in different places. Students who saw the biblical understanding of sexuality or divorce as being fixed did not necessarily see the traditional stance on, for example, euthanasia as being equally rigid. The kind of experience being reflected on has an effect on whether students cross the interpretive threshold or retreat to earlier ways of thinking.

The extent to which the interpretive threshold concept is *bounded* is open to question; the importance of recognizing the interpreted nature of texts is shared with other theological sub-disciplines and other subject areas.

The Complexifying Threshold Concept

As I explored the ways in which the students attended to the canonical voice in the mutually critical dialogue, a third threshold concept emerged. When students recognise that theological reflection complexifies the realities being explored they negotiate the complexifying threshold concept. I developed my understanding of this threshold concept as I discerned two further dysfunctional strategies that short-circuited the reflective conversation: the strategies of avoidance and temporizing.

The strategy of avoidance

I noted in my discussion of the interpretive threshold concept that the apparent ease with which Paul and Gina used the text as a portal to understanding may, in fact, have indicated that they had jumped too readily to a false synthesis between faith and experience. They were thus avoiding the complexity of the dialogue; adopting, in other words, a strategy of avoidance (Savin-Baden, 2006, pp. 164-5; 2008, p.81). Moreover, when I looked more closely at what the students had to say about the spiritual dimensions of theological reflection I noticed the tendency to think that in praying about an issue they had done all that needed to be done. This formed its own form of avoidance (see Chapter 7, p. 109-110). Like the strategy of retreat, avoidance leads straight back to pre-liminal understanding as represented by the dotted line in Figure 6.1 (p. 83).

I found a further example of the strategy in the form of a ‘craving for dullness’ and a simpler approach to teaching and learning that seemed appealing but ultimately unsatisfactory to one of the second year focus groups. The discussion began when Keith suggested that he was too outspoken in group settings. I responded that we enjoyed his contributions and that life would be dull without him. His response found resonance among his peers: ‘Sometimes, Quentin’ he said, ‘one craves dullness.’ The ensuing conversation had shades of retreat about it. The students wanted to go back to a simpler approach to faith and learning. There is resonance once again with Adam and Eve as they look back with regretful longing at the Garden of Eden. This is what the students seemed to be doing: looking back longingly at lost innocence.

The conversation soon took a different turn, however. One participant lamented a lack of clarity about ‘the answers’ provided by the tutors. She asked why they were never given ‘the list of what you need to know’. There was an enthusiastic response from the rest of the group: ‘That’s the course I want!’ shouted one; ‘This is what you believe – this is how it goes!’ said another to murmurs of assent from the rest of the group. There seemed to be a desire for a ‘banking’ approach to teaching and learning rather than an experiential or reflective one, and they did not

acknowledge the amount of factual information in the LMC curriculum. It was as if they wanted the tutors to provide them with a set of answers that would circumvent the need to engage experience with the text. They wanted to avoid theological reflection by getting their tutors to do it for them. It all seemed to be a flirtation, however, as another student changed the direction of the discussion once again by saying that her learning had caused her to ask more questions. Another agreed that the more she had learnt the more she came to see the limits of her prior understanding.

The strategy of temporizing

The last of the dysfunctional strategies emerged from my observations of Norah, a second year student. Norah had been introduced to some complex ideas about the development of the creeds and trinitarian theology that did not fit comfortably with her view of God. This was the catalyst that led her into liminal space where she found it difficult to pray. Her response was to look for simple signs in the natural world to remind her of God's presence. She found such a sign when she saw red kites in the Northamptonshire sky:

Looking at the Nicene Creed and the Trinity that really knocked me backwards because my image of it, I've really struggled to – how I picture things – to connect it with the module we've just done. And I've just had to say to the Lord 'I can't pray: just be there.' And it's very strange because – I don't know whether I'm just looking for things – but often, if it's been a day when things haven't been right, I've looked up and there's been a red kite overhead and it happens so often in places I haven't expected to see them. But I've almost started to think, oh I don't feel quite so good – oh, I'm looking for it and – I don't know – to me it's just a little sign that everything will be okay.

Intrigued by the image I asked her to say more about the red kites:

I just think that as a bird they're beautiful and actually we have quite a number of them around the county nowadays but I've seen them in other places, well, coming up the motorway around Bristol out of the blue – oh, a red kite and it's been enough to actually think: yes, he's there.

The simple beauty of the red kites reminded her that God was there however difficult she found her learning on the LMC. At that stage there was no need for her to progress to a more thorough engagement with the text that would facilitate greater understanding of trinitarian theology. Whenever things became difficult or confusing she had only to watch the red kites and her faith was restored so that she could postpone any troublesome engagement and carry on living in the liminal space.

Norah had found a way of dealing with life in the liminal space – a strategy of temporizing (Perry, 1999 [1970], pp. 199-203; Savin-Baden, 2006, pp. 164; 2008, p.81). Retreat and avoidance are ways of dealing with disjunction that prevent the text from facilitating transition towards understanding and/or transformation. Temporizing is a way of dealing with disjunction that results in an extended stay in the liminal space as students find ways to postpone engagement between experience and tradition. It short-circuits theological reflection by causing a return to the liminal space as suggested in Figure 6.1 (p.83). At first I thought that Norah was the only student who adopted this strategy, but closer attention to the first year students made me change my mind. In their focus group the first year students made much of the support provided by their peers as they faced challenging or troublesome learning. I interpreted this as a further form of temporizing and noted that it did not figure so prominently in the second and third year focus groups.

Identifying the complexifying threshold concept

The dysfunctional strategy of temporizing involves delaying engagement with complexity while that of avoidance involves circumventing it altogether. To remove these short-circuits it is necessary for students to recognize that theological reflection complexifies the realities it explores. They must negotiate the complexifying threshold concept. In Chapter 4 (p. 62) I raised the issue of whether a mutually critical conversation is likely to result in a meaningless cacophony that renders its outcome unclear. There is an extent to which the conversation's complexity means there is always likely to be ambiguity and uncertainty; the strategies of avoidance and temporizing are all about not facing it. Students who have negotiated the complexifying threshold concept are prepared to live with the ambiguity that is often the outcome of theological reflection.

Discussing the complexifying threshold concept

The complexifying threshold concept can be related to Meyer and Land's (2003) five characteristics. It is *transformative* because its negotiation removes short-circuits that jump too readily or easily to a false synthesis or that circumvent the complex wrestling involved in theological reflection. Its negotiation encourages students to use the text to search out further complexity, disjunction and liminality that facilitate further rounds of reflection and learning. One of the students in the discussion above, for example, had discovered that the more she learned the more she knew she needed to learn.

Its negotiation is *troublesome* because it involves abandoning quick or easy ways of approaching experience: this was shown by the students' flirtation with avoidance. They wanted to return to a more straightforward approach but realized that they no longer could. This

raises the question of whether negotiation of the complexifying threshold concept is *irreversible*. Its troublesome nature suggests that the temptation to return to the use of strategies that circumvent complexity is likely to be ever-present. As I outlined in Chapter 3 (pp. 36, 43-4), Meyer and Land (2006b) suggest that oscillation is a characteristic of the liminality that precedes negotiation of threshold concepts. The students' awareness of their limited understanding and the need to ask questions suggests they know that they must move forward in their learning, but they look back with nostalgic regret to a time when learning was less complex and less challenging (Meyer and Land, 2006a, p. xiv).

The swimming analogy is once again illuminative. Learning to swim irreversibly transformed my view of water and swimming pools; but, at the same time, it opened up a world of complexity in which there was space for further learning. Learning backstroke was troublesome; every time I put my head back, water would go up my nose. I longed for a simpler aquatic world in which I did not have to suffer such unpleasant experiences. I still have not mastered butterfly; the complex coordination involved represents a threshold that I fear will always be beyond me. None of this suggests, however, that I have forgotten how to swim. I cannot forget because the change was irreversible.

The parallel with swimming also serves to introduce a discussion of how the strategy of temporizing helps students to deal with the troublesome nature of the complexifying threshold concept. In my early swimming lessons I was given a rubber ring to provide buoyancy. What I failed to realize was that, as the lessons progressed, my instructor gradually let air out of the rubber ring until I reached the stage when it could be discarded. The notion of temporizing prompted a return to an avenue of exploration that I had identified earlier in the research. Turner's (1974, p. 232) anthropological work on liminality suggests that the formation of a *communitas* in which initiates can learn as equals under the tutelage of elders plays a significant part in their journey through liminal space. I wondered whether the LMC might provide such a *communitas* and thus facilitate learning (see Chapter 2, pp. 22-3 and Appendix 3, pp. 203-4).

The fact that first year students made so much of the support offered by their peers suggests that the *communitas* did indeed provide a 'rubber ring' as an aid to 'buoyancy' in the liminal space. It was as if there was a 'zone of proximal learning' (Vygotsky, 1978) in which, to use a different metaphor, the support of the group provided 'scaffolding' to support them in the liminal space. Such scaffolding can either be a helpful way of dealing with difficulty or an unhelpful means of coping with an extended stay in the liminal space – one student's scaffolding is another's temporizing.

For students to move forward to spaces where learning and reflection can take place it is necessary for them to discard or become less reliant on the scaffolding. A pedagogical skill for LMC tutors to develop is the wisdom to know when, proverbially, to let some air out of the rubber ring. As Norah becomes more sophisticated in her theological understanding the simple reassurance offered by her sightings of red kites becomes less significant; as first year students become more confident in dealing with the complexities of theological exploration they become less reliant on the reassurance offered by their peers.

Complexification is hardly likely to be *integrative* although negotiation of the threshold is likely to instil a willingness to live with uncertainty. An integrated, postliminal state is likely to be elusive; theological reflection leads to new experience with its own inherent disjunction that triggers further rounds of reflection and learning. It is also unclear whether it demonstrates the *bounded* nature of theological reflection because of the complexifying nature of other qualitative research methods.

Limitations

In this chapter I have outlined how three threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students emerged from the first cycle of data analysis. These are, first, the pervasive; second, the interpretive; and, third, the complexifying threshold concepts. These remove short-circuits in the conversational process in the ways indicated in Figure 6.1 (p.83). There are, however, some significant limitations to these findings.

First, it bears repeating that they only relate to the accounts of theological reflection provided by the students in the focus groups. It may be that Jeff and Harriet are not the only ones who adopt the strategy of restriction. Some of those whose contributions in the focus group showed that they had engaged in effective theological reflection might not do so if they were to be asked to talk about another experience on another day. As I have suggested by the use of my swimming analogy, although all of experience is the potential field of theological reflection it is not plausible to suggest that LMC students or anyone else would reflect theologically on every experience they have. They may find some kinds of experience easier to reflect on than others. I have not, therefore, hypothesized a typology of theological reflection among the students: I have only identified three threshold concepts that are related to dysfunctional strategies in using the text to deal with liminal experience.

Second, in Chapter 3 (pp. 41-3) I questioned whether maturation may affect when and how students negotiate threshold concepts in theological reflection. While this is an interesting question it is a difficult one to answer. As I suggested in my discussion of the interpretive

threshold concept, what counts as ‘maturity’ may vary according to cultural context. Moreover, it was not a question that the fieldwork was designed to answer; my findings have only uncovered short-circuits and threshold concepts to be negotiated in removing them.

Third, if Meyer and Land’s (2003) characteristics are taken as criteria for identifying threshold concepts, my findings suggest that not all of the characteristics are demonstrated by all of the threshold concepts. The nature of theological reflection and the relatedness of texts to ultimate values and meanings raise some interesting questions about *irreversibility*. Deeply held views about the divinely inspired nature of texts make a return to earlier ways of thinking an ever-present likelihood, giving the appearance of oscillation between states. Once again this raises the issue of whether students who understand the Bible or other traditional resources to be receptacles of divinely inspired truth can ever fully negotiate thresholds in theological reflection; the canonical voice is always likely to be privileged over the other conversation partners. Whether the threshold concepts I have identified help to establish the conceptual boundaries of theological reflection is also a moot point. I will return to these issues and their implications for the developing literature on threshold concepts in my concluding chapter.

Finally, this chapter has focussed mainly on two voices in the mutually critical dialogue; those of the ethnographic and canonical models of theological reflection. (It has referred briefly to the praxis model and found engagement with interdisciplinary insights to be markedly absent from LMC students’ theological reflection.) My focus has been on those students who engaged scripture and/or other texts with experience. This means I have concentrated on fewer than half the students. The remaining eighteen, however, had their own ways of correlating faith and experience. It is to these that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 – A Prayerful Conversation

Introduction

In this chapter I begin by summarizing what I discovered in the interviews with the LMC tutors. I show how one of these interviews provided the key that unlocked my interpretation of the data gathered among the students. This heralds a shift away from a self-conscious engagement with the text and towards an exploration of the *habitus* or disposition of the soul and the spiritual dimension of theological reflection. I move on to show how the importance of this aspect of theological reflection among the students emerged from a second cycle of focus group analysis. From there I identify two further threshold concepts, relating them to a redrawn model of liminality and theological reflection and to Meyer and Land's (2003) threshold concept characteristics. The chapter concludes with a summary of the data gathered from the final, validating focus group.

The tutor interviews

Correlating faith and experience

It came as no surprise that five out of the six tutors conceived theological reflection in much the same way that I understood it when I embarked on my research. We had, after all, worked together for a number of years in designing and delivering a training programme in which theological reflection is a central component. Thus, one way or another, they all saw it as involving the correlation of experience with faith insights. One, for example, described it as follows:

I would define theological reflection as looking at an event in one's life, or perhaps a church's life, or an event in the world, and try to gain a better understanding of it by looking at it through the Christian tradition which can be from scripture, can be from the lives of the saints from church history, and in that way try to get a better understanding how God was working in that event whether it be a personal one or an event in the life of a church or the life of the world.

Another described it similarly:

It's basically taking an experience and thinking about it - bringing in the resources that you have of your biblical and theological understanding you have to that point, and allowing the two to kind of interact with each other and have a conversation with each other, with the objective of either affirming or contradicting what you've hitherto thought and so forming either a stronger acceptance of what you've previously thought or modifying it.

Using a rather more imaginative image, a third tutor saw theological reflection as a 'multidimensional game of chess' involving 'horizontal and vertical movements' across layers of scripture, tradition and experience. A fourth, meanwhile, defined reflection as looking at an event in the past and its effect. She said that theological reflection involves bringing God into the process. A fifth saw it as shining God's light into human experience and using it to shape our response (this made her the only tutor to mention any kind of response or resulting action).

Barriers to students' practice of theological reflection

My colleagues focussed on the correlation of experience and faith insights and this involved a cognitive approach to theological reflection. Thus the examples they gave of barriers in its practice centred on factors they saw as blocking the cognitive process. One suggested that church tradition is a factor and that evangelicals particularly are likely to resort to 'proof-texting' in a way that forecloses on the conversation. Three tutors thought that there is too much of a 'mystique' to theological reflection and suggested that this leads students to 'switch off' because they see it as being 'too academic'. All but one wondered whether some of the issues I explored in my first paper in Part 1 of the doctoral programme (see Appendix 1 pp. 152-7) such as temperament, personality type, or learning preferences might be factors.

A different approach to theological reflection

Annette saw things differently. Her understanding of theological reflection was so at odds with my own that on my initial reading of her interview I struggled to know how to relate it to my research question. Like my other colleagues I had been so focussed on the 'self-conscious scholarly endeavour' (Farley, 2001, p. 44) side of the equation that I had missed the 'disposition of the soul'. Annette's interview helped to redress the balance and resonated so strongly with what I found among the students that it became pivotal to the project. Attending to the voice of God and encountering the Holy Spirit in prayer were important aspects of theological reflection for Annette. When I asked her to define theological reflection she began by saying that it involves stopping to ask 'Where is God in life? Where am I in connection with it?' She then said:

That's what I call my 'theological reflection': it's that time out every day of seeing where I am with God, where he is with me and where I've walked majorly off the path and need to come back.

There was here a familiar concern to bring theological insights into daily life and there remained a cognitive aspect in her approach. For Annette, however, theological reflection seemed to be just as much a spiritual exercise. I asked how she goes about discerning where God is in her life. She replied:

Through prayer really – um – and when I’ve done the process of the thinking through and then just trying to pray into it. And crucially the *listening* (emphasis). I can be very good at analysing something and then the phone will go and I’ll dash off to something else [...] but taking time to pray through something and to listen.

Prayer, then, is central to Annette’s practice of theological reflection and it is a two-way process. She is still, she prays and she listens. This prompted me to ask to whom or what she listens. She responded:

Ah – I’m listening. Perhaps it’s the voice in my head that comes through and you may say that’s God speaking to you which tends to happen in the middle of the night when I’m asleep because I think I talk too much. But listening perhaps to the internal voice.

I asked her to say some more about this ‘internal voice’ and she said:

The internal voice that can say to me – um – this is the way you should be approaching something – um – a different way of doing things. Is that my internal rationalization of things? Is it inspired by the Holy Spirit? You tell me.

She seemed to be talking, to use Farley’s terminology once again, about a *habitus* or ‘disposition of the soul’. I probed further asking her how she thinks the ‘internal voice’ is formed. She replied:

Through experience, I think. And crucially in the very beginning, experience of understanding situations and working through from it. But also the giving it up and giving it over. You can always rationalize things with a human head but actually letting go and letting God speak into something – um – and doing the ‘your will be done’.

So experience plays a part and there is a purposeful, cognitive element as she seeks to ‘rationalize things with a human head’ but she refers to the Holy Spirit and formation involves ‘letting go and letting God speak’. I asked her how she discerns God’s voice. She said that there are times when she is convinced it is God who has prompted her to think or act in a particular way but on other occasions she confuses this with her own ideas. She finds it difficult to discern between the two but ultimately she said ‘I just know’. It seems to be about disposition.

So far she had not mentioned any traditional or theological texts so I asked what part the Bible has to play in formation and theological reflection. She had clearly negotiated the interpretive

threshold concept as I describe it in Chapter 6 (pp. 94-7) as she responded by saying that the Bible is ‘there to inspire and guide’, that it is open to interpretation, and is not the ‘absolute be all and end all’. I pushed her further to say something more about the role it plays in formation and she replied:

The internal voice and formation? The reading of the Bible changes because you can come to a scripture time and time and time again and depending on the situation the meaning within what you’re reading may change and I think the internal voice plays a part in that. It’s that reinterpretation of times and situations. And things are not set in stone; not historic; it is living – so using it in the light of your experience.

I asked whether this meant that she understood there to be a dialectical relationship between experience and scripture and she agreed that it did. Her interpretation of the Bible is formed by experience, and reflection on experience is informed by the Bible.

What at first frustrated me and later intrigued me was that it took so long for Annette to talk about the text. I came to realize that this was because her usual practice is not to enter into a self-conscious engagement with a text but to engage with her ‘internal voice’ that has, in part, been formed by the text and its dialectical relationship with experience. For her things are not ‘set in stone’ but living. Theological reflection for Annette does not involve engagement with a fixed text but with the Holy Spirit and a ‘living human document’.

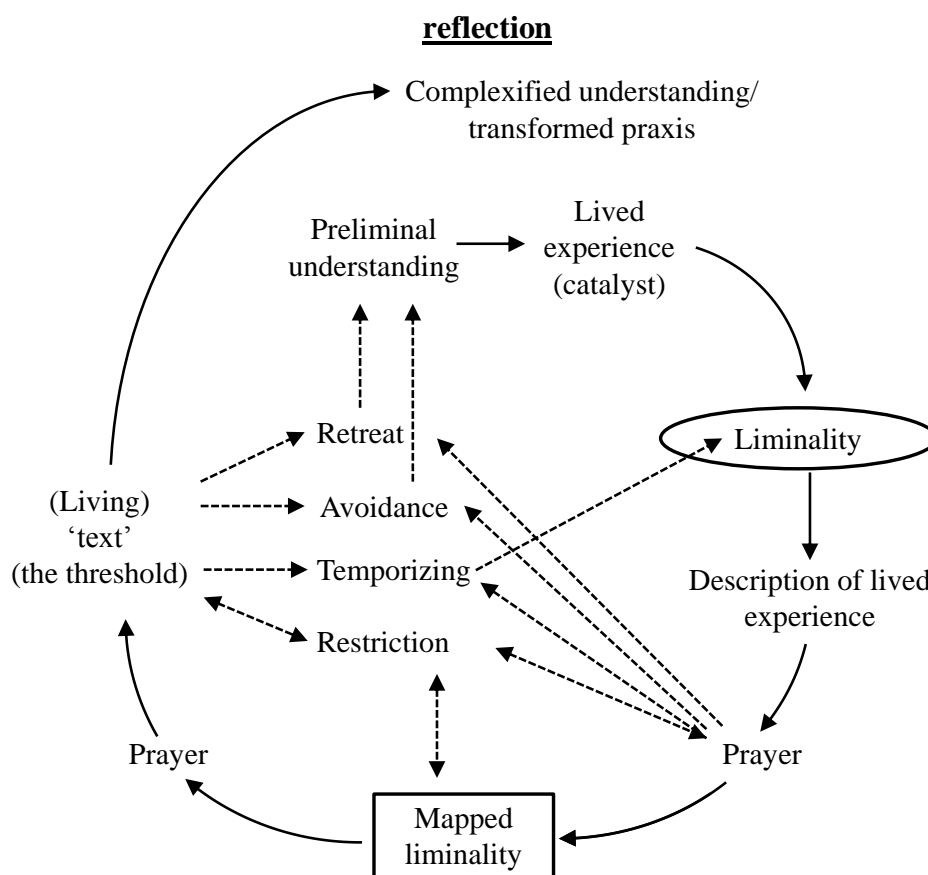
Reassessing the student data

In light of what I had learned from Annette I revisited the data I had collected in the student focus groups, especially from the participants who did not seem to engage purposefully with a traditional text. Two further threshold concepts emerged as a result. The first was related to a shift in my own thinking and a second to students’ understanding. The shift in my own thinking was to recognize that theological reflection among the students is not merely a cognitive activity: it is also a dispositional and spiritual one. I call this the ‘spiritual’ threshold concept. Crossing the threshold involves recognizing that prayer, or attending to the ‘contours of spiritual discernment’ (Leach, 2007, p. 28) is an important dimension of theological reflection. Prayerful attention to experience is part of the process of theological reflection, not a separate activity.

The second threshold concept is related to the first: students’ theological reflection needs to take a subjective turn so that they can be attentive to the formation of an internal *habitus* of faith and explore how this is correlated with experience (Leach, 2007). I call this the subjective threshold concept. I now explore these two portals in understanding in detail, relating them to

Meyer and Land's (2003) characteristics of threshold concepts and to a conversational model of liminality and theological reflection redrawn to include a spiritual dimension as shown in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 – A conversational model of liminality and spirituality in theological



The spiritual threshold concept

Negotiation of the spiritual threshold concept demonstrated the first of Meyer and Land's (2003) characteristics: it was *transformative*. It enabled me to answer the question that was in my mind at the outset of the research: why do some students seem to have an aptitude or appetite for theological reflection while others do not? The answer is that, for the most part, they *were* engaging in theological reflection; it was simply that I did not recognize it. Theological reflection as I originally understood it involved correlating experience with 'tradition'. 'Tradition', however, was ill-defined. In Chapter 1 (p.12) I related it to four theological 'voices' as identified by Cameron et al. (2010). Thus it included the formal theology of the academe, the normative theology of the Bible and other texts, the espoused theology of spoken beliefs and operant theology that is lived out in practice; all of these went together to form the 'tradition' of a church or Christian organization. I assumed these 'voices' to be relatively fixed, readily apprehendable and available to be correlated with experience by LMC students in a cognitive exercise.

I showed in Chapter 6 (pp.89-97) that some students – but fewer than half of them – engaged in a purposeful conversation with such traditional sources, especially the Bible. For the majority, however, a different kind of conversation was taking place. It involved prayer. This was a two-way process. The first was a kind of petitioning, a bringing of the experience being reflected on before God, and the second involved listening. In the previous chapter I suggested that experience acts as a catalyst that leads students into liminal space. This space is then mapped or given shape by a descriptive stage which, in theory although mostly not in the practice of the students, is aided by interdisciplinary insights. The transformation that took place in my understanding allowed me to see that the descriptive aspect of prayer constitutes a further mapping of the liminal space as indicated in Figure 7.1. It further enabled me to see that the listening stage involves attentive engagement with the living human text as indicated to the left of the diagram.

The transformation removed a blockage in my understanding of the focus group data. Hitherto I had seen students' mention of prayer and the Holy Spirit as being examples of popular piety that indicated they had misunderstood my questions about theological reflection. Now I recognized that the two-way process of prayer *was* their method of theological reflection. Giving up my old way of thinking was *troublesome* because I needed to move beyond my assumptions about the cognitive nature of theological reflection that had, up to that point, dominated the research. It also had implications for my understanding of the *boundedness* of theological reflection as it now extended to include the practice of prayer. Whilst it is difficult to be objective about my own learning I am unlikely to revert to excluding the spiritual aspect of theological reflection in further research among the students, so the realization was *irreversible*. It was also *integrative* because, as I now show, I was able to incorporate far more of the data into my findings in a positive way.

The students and prayer

Examples of prayer were spread throughout the focus groups. A first year student was at a loss as to how he could help a family grieving the loss of a child. As he prepared to visit them all he could do was pray. The spiritual dimension helped him to make sense of a tragic situation and prepare for the visit. Another student, Donna, told one of the second year focus groups about her response to a radio programme about a terminally ill man who went to court seeking the right to decide when to die. Donna's response to the idea of assisted suicide was emotional and, as the following excerpt from the focus group transcript shows, she saw prayer as the only possible response to her liminal experience:

But I prayed. I prayed so hard. I'm going to cry now. I prayed so hard until it was all over for God to do it (*cries*). This is how much it upset me. Anyway, sorry, because that's what I felt was the solution. Not that the solution was to say actually that you're suffering so much that we can just forget what we believe in, kind of thing, but to say, well, what is my solution then? My solution is to pray to God to step in and help him in the right way.

These examples show that, at the same time as providing a descriptive function, prayer at this stage in the conversation has potential to be dysfunctional. It may become a mechanism of avoidance or retreat as would-be reflectors think that, to use Annette's words, in 'giving it up and giving it over' they have done all that they need to do. It may be that a difficult ethical situation such as the one that Donna spoke about requires theological reflectors to take some kind of action rather than simply leaving it to God. Prayer in such a situation may equally become a form of temporizing that supports reflectors through an extended stay in the liminal space or, as happened with Harriet (see Chapter 6, pp. 86-7) prayer could be seen as appropriate only to certain areas of life and so result in restricted theological reflection. These dangers are represented by the dotted arrows leading to the dysfunctional spaces in the centre of the diagram. Thus, like the text in Chapter 6, prayer may prove either to be a portal to renewed understanding or a barrier preventing progress in theological reflection.

Prayer and listening

Annette's interview had helped me to see prayer as part of the descriptive, mapping process in LMC students' theological reflection, albeit one with potential to be problematic. It also helped to make sense of some other puzzling data I had gathered from the students. Once the liminal space has been mapped there is a second phase of prayer as shown to the left of Figure 7.1. Rather than petitioning or describing, this phase involves listening to what Annette described as her 'internal voice' and I have called an internally constructed framework or *habitus* of faith. The encounter, then, rather than being with the Bible or other traditional texts is with the 'living human document'. This is constructed out of internalized dimensions of faith (Le Cornu, 2005) that include Cameron et al.'s four theological 'voices' but also significant personal voices such as those of family members, priests or ministers, Sunday school teachers or youth leaders. Negotiation of the spiritual threshold enabled me to see that for LMC students it is often this 'text' that is listened to and engaged with in the theologically reflective dialogue.

The first year student who visited a family that was grieving the death of a toddler reported how he spoke in the situation and said that he did not know 'where it all came from'. Another student thought she had the answer:

I think God the Holy Spirit knew what that family wanted because God the Holy Spirit put those words in your mouth. That opening occurred and I think God does that. We're only a utensil in God's hands, really, aren't we? And I think God the Holy Spirit put that in you for those folks.

This prompted murmurs of agreement from the other students. In the same group a medical professional shared how she listened to a patient who was distressed because her sister had been a victim of crime. The student's interpretation was that God had placed her in a position to help the woman. For these students theological reflection involved listening as well as praying. The medical professional discerned God's part in placing her in a position to help a distressed woman and the Holy Spirit was seen as being instrumental in helping a student to find the right words to comfort a grieving family. Thus the spiritual dimension of theological reflection continues beyond the descriptive, mapping phase of the conversation as is indicated by the further stage of prayer to the left of Figure 7.1. It involves attentive listening to the internally held *habitus* or framework of faith.

The subjective threshold concept

Listening to an internalized 'text' has further potential to short-circuit the reflective conversation. A student was very quick to suggest that her peer's words and actions in dealing with a grieving family were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Another student's comments about prayer and theological reflection drew the response from another participant that God 'just throws light' on difficult pastoral situations. The danger is that intuitive thoughts, words or actions will be seen as being divinely sanctioned without further attention or exploration. Once again this runs the risk of returning reflectors to preliminal space through avoidance or retreat. Belief that God is speaking may cause students to tarry in the liminal space and thus give rise to temporizing. The danger here is that students will act too much out of disposition and not enough out of cognition. The living 'text' has the same potential for dysfunction as traditional texts and can either serve as a portal to complexified understanding or as a short-circuit in the reflective process.

Negotiation of the subjective threshold concept removes these short-circuits and so it is *transformative* demonstrating the first of Meyer and Land's (2003) characteristics. Students who have negotiated it recognize the need to explore the interior self in order to pay attention to how the internal *habitus* of faith has been formed and how it informs theological reflection. Such exploration of faith enables students to progress to the space at the top of Figure 7.1 where more complex understandings of experience and transformed praxis become possible. One of these students was Donna. In response to her reflection on assisted suicide for the terminally ill,

I asked her what it was from scripture or tradition that made her believe that it should only be God who chooses when we live or die. She replied:

Well, the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not kill is what jumps to mind. I don't – I've often thought, Quentin, that I don't really have a very good – I don't link the Bible up very much with my beliefs. I've kind of realized that my faith has grown through what I've learned from priest, people, from the people around me from discussion groups. I mean yes, of course readings are said in church and things like that, but I'm not one of those people who can say: well, that piece of scripture leads to that particular belief.

I then sought clarification and Donna explained the prominent role that the voices of clergy and family members had played in the formation of her conception of right and wrong. That conception had been brought into a dialogue with the experience of listening to the radio programme. I then asked whether the LMC had made any difference to the way she thought about such issues and she replied:

It's made me want to make sure that I'm happy with any of it. At the beginning of the course I was very conscious that maybe I just believed these things because perhaps my parents said it. And now I'm determined to sort of work it out for myself that that is what I believe, if you know what I mean.

Autobiography, then, has a significant part to play in theological reflection (Bennett, 2013). In the same focus group, Jeff saw the LMC in the same way:

I will say that doing this course has made me sort of take my faith out and look at it. And think, well, you know, where's this coming from; am I right? Is what I believe the same as what I'm being told is the history of the church? I think so far, touch wood, I've sort of stuck with it.

As well as being transformative, my findings suggest that the subjective threshold concept is *integrative*. The internal *habitus* is formed, in part, by engagement with traditional texts so it involves attention to the canonical voice in the way I suggested in Chapter 5 (pp. 70-2). Donna and Jeff's critical self-examination involves exploring how the Bible and other traditional resources have gone together with personal voices and experience to form their internalized *habitus* of faith. This relates it to the interpretive threshold concept of the previous chapter because effective theological reflection emerges out of a self-reflexive examination of the conscious and unconscious interpretative decisions the students have made.

It was not only Donna and Jeff who showed that they had negotiated the subjective threshold concept. The first year student with whom I conducted an individual interview entered into a self-reflexive critique in which he explored the role played by family, other personal voices, and the Bible in interpreting his experience of a grieving process. The theme was taken up in the final validating focus group where there was agreement that the opportunity to engage in a self-reflexive critique is one of the most valuable aspects of the LMC.

Negotiation of the threshold concept provides students with greater clarity as to the *bounded* nature of theological reflection. I have suggested that for some students theological reflection involves prayer: this should not be taken to mean that I see it as being the same thing as prayer. Simply praying and listening intuitively to a tacit 'internal voice', I have argued, has potential to short-circuit the reflective process. A self-reflexive examination of the internally held *habitus* involves an exploration of the faith dimensions that have informed their interpretation of experience. This facilitates an interpretive conversation that has potential to transform understanding and praxis. The subjective turn, therefore, is an essential part of prayerful theological reflection and serves to set its boundaries with other pietistic practices. Students who have negotiated the subjective threshold concept know that it is important to make the connection between our own biographies and the way in which we interpret experience (Bennett, 2013, pp. 77-8).

As with other threshold concepts in theological reflection there is a relationship between *irreversibility* and *troublesome-ness* when it comes to the subjective threshold. The framework of faith is likely to be tacitly held (Polanyi, 1967) and may thus constitute 'troublesome knowledge' (Perkins, 2006, pp. 40-1). Accessing such knowledge may be problematic as unexplored assumptions and beliefs are brought to the surface and explored for their efficacy in new contexts. It may be that this kind of troublesome-ness is what one of the students was experiencing in the extract in the previous chapter (p. 90) as she rowed her 'little boat against the storm' through the first year of the LMC programme. Its difficulty means that students are likely to oscillate from one side of the threshold to the other and it may take some time for them to reach the stage where it is irreversibly negotiated.

The final, validating focus group

Five threshold concepts

Thus I found that there are five threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students. In the previous chapter I set out, first, how negotiating the *pervasive threshold concept* leads students to see that theological reflection is relevant to all of experience; second, how going through the *interpretive threshold concept* involves recognizing the interpreted

nature of texts; and, third, how those who grasp the *complexifying threshold concept* come to understand that theological reflection involves seeking out further liminality and disjunction. In this chapter I have added a fourth, the *spiritual threshold concept* negotiation of which involves recognizing the part prayer has to play in some students' theological reflection and how this is related to dispositional knowing; and a fifth, the *subjective threshold concept* that, once it has been crossed, encourages an examination of the inner-self that explores how the internally held *habitus* of faith has been brought into conversation with experience.

By the time I conducted the final focus group I had already formulated inchoate versions of these threshold concepts. The purpose of the focus group interview was to validate and develop them by working collaboratively with a group of eight students all of whom were nearing the end of their second year of training and had originally been interviewed eighteen months earlier. I began by asking them to revisit the situations they had reflected on in the original interview to see how their understanding of theological reflection had changed. I went on to introduce the notion of threshold concepts by playing a simple game.

Playing an 'epistemic game'

The game involves passing a pair of scissors from person to person around the group. Each participant has to say whether they are 'open' or 'closed' as they pass the scissors to their neighbour. The concept that needs to be grasped is that the status of being 'open' or 'closed' has nothing to do with the scissors; it concerns whether or not the person passing them on has their legs crossed. Two of the students had taken part in the activity before and thus understood the 'underlying epistemic game' (Perkins, 2006). The others gradually crossed the 'threshold' that enabled them to grasp the concept as we played; one student, to her frustration and everyone else's amusement, did not 'get it' and had to have it explained to her when we finished playing.

I asked whether the game resonated with their learning about theological reflection. It did. One student said that at one stage he thought that the game had to do with which way up the scissors were being held. This, coincidentally, worked for a few rounds and he found it all the more frustrating when he discovered that he was wrong. Another spotted that it had to do with legs rather than scissors but thought it concerned whether the person doing the passing had their legs together or apart. We noted that it was relatively easy to move from this partial understanding to grasp the true concept behind the game. All of this resonated with their learning about theological reflection.

Relating the game to the LMC

I asked whether they could identify moments when they had grasped the underlying rules of theological reflection. Ena identified a point early in the programme when students were asked to work in groups to tell the story of the Nativity from memory without reference to their Bibles. It helped her realize that much of the story as she had internalized it originated from later tradition rather than the gospels – a donkey for Mary to ride from Nazareth to Bethlehem, for example, and the presence of an ox in the stable. She had also been fascinated to discover in the ensuing plenary discussion that Luke (2.1-20) and Matthew (1.18-2.23) wrote their stories to different audiences and for different purposes. This had helped her recognize that there are layers of interpretation and subjectivity involved in biblical texts and that there are other, extra-biblical sources to draw on in theological reflection.

Gina saw an interactive Bible study on 1 Corinthians 12 (see the Prologue pp. 1-3 and Epilogue pp. 132-3) as a particularly significant moment. Participants had been asked to write their strengths and weaknesses onto the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle which when assembled formed a human body to highlight the image from the Pauline text. This had helped her to access her interior self, relate her self-reflexivity to a scriptural passage and relate the two to the experience of church membership. The group discussed a residential weekend in which they had been introduced to, and invited to explore, six ‘streams’ of spirituality from Christian tradition (Foster, 2004). There was agreement that the variety of approaches discussed gave them new resources for reflection and that they had come to value the importance of the spiritual dimension in theological reflection.

Introducing the notion of threshold concepts

Next I introduced the focus group to the notion of threshold concepts, using Meyer and Land’s (2003) definition as outlined in Chapter 2 (p. 23). We discussed the extent to which the theory is a help towards understanding stuck-ness in theological reflection and towards explaining the experiences they had described. The students reported both that the idea that the negotiation of a threshold concept is preceded by an experience of liminality, and that it involves transformation in understanding, had particularly strong resonance. They were able to relate these ideas back to the scissor game and to their learning about theological reflection.

We followed this up with a Bible study on the rich man and the camel and the eye of the needle (Mark 10.17-27) based around the material outlined in Chapter 3 (pp. 28-37). I invited them to identify the image Jesus used to describe the portal the rich man needed to negotiate to become a disciple. They recognized the significance of the eye of the needle and that, although it related to wealth in the case of the rich man, there might be other blockages that are hindrances in

Christian discipleship. They easily made the link between the eye of the needle and threshold concepts. I showed them two cartoons showing camels getting stuck negotiating eyes of needles. The absurdity and difficulty resonated with their experience of getting stuck with theological reflection and was the source of considerable amusement. The conclusion I drew was that the discussion validated the idea that threshold concepts are a helpful way of describing the stuck-ness associated with theological reflection among LMC students.

Validating the pervasive threshold concept

The next stage was to explore with the students what those threshold concepts might be. I presented each of the five portals as I understood them at that stage for discussion. First, I suggested that there might be a threshold concept in relation to identifying experience. One student commented that when she participated in the original focus group she had found it difficult to think of an experience on which to reflect. As she approached the end of her training, however, things were very different because, as she put it, ‘you tend to sort of want to reflect on everything you do now, don’t you?’ Another participant agreed saying that although she does not write her reflections down she is always ‘thinking about things’ and ‘bouncing it off other people as well’. For these students theological reflection was no longer confined to experiences at church or on the LMC; its relevance had come to pervade every area of life. The focus group had become a collaborative process enabling me to work towards identifying and validating what I have called the pervasive threshold concept.

Validating the interpretive threshold concept

Second, I proposed a portal that involves recognizing that texts are interpreted. Ena had already spoken about her exploration of the Nativity story. Originally from a Pentecostal background, she explained how five years of worshipping in an Anglican context had made her question what she saw as her fundamentalist upbringing. The experience had led her into liminal space. In the early weeks of the LMC programme she had negotiated the interpretive threshold concept, partly because of her learning in the exercise on the Nativity. Another student from a similar background said how he had found it liberating when his LMC studies helped him to recognize that the Bible has to be interpreted contextually. These students were now able to engage in a mutually critical dialogue between text and experience rather than using a fixed interpretation to retreat to earlier ways of thinking. Negotiation of the interpretive threshold concept had removed short-circuits in their practice of theological reflection.

Validating the complexifying threshold concept

Third, I suggested to the group that theological reflection complexifies the realities it explores. When I asked the students to revisit the situations they had explored in the earlier focus group,

the one who showed the most marked development was Jacqui. She had been introduced to theological reflection on another training programme before she began training on the LMC but confessed to finding the concept alien and baffling. When I introduced the notion of complexity it chimed with what she had learned over the past eighteen months. She agreed that the post-liminal state that is the outcome is often untidy and complex, suggesting that ‘dirt in the real world doesn’t actually fit’ with insights from the Bible or tradition. She connected this untidiness and complexity with ‘God who is more massive than we could ever comprehend’. Jacqui’s comments sparked a discussion in which the participants came to the conclusion that the outcome of theological reflection is often problematic and that the resultant problems give rise to further reflection.

My eight co-researchers, especially Jacqui, had negotiated the complexifying threshold and thus removed any short-circuits that avoid or retreat from liminal spaces by jumping to a false synthesis between faith and experience or by looking for simplistic answers.

Validating the spiritual threshold concept

Fourth, I explored the spiritual concept with the focus group. At the time I was in the early stages of my thinking on this portal and the participants helped me to develop it. Jacqui’s comments were particularly insightful. Her understanding of theological reflection had developed to a stage where it mirrored the approach of Annette as described earlier in this chapter. She begins with a prayerful, descriptive stage:

If there’s a situation I need to think about, it’s bringing the situation before God – maybe a prayer – and thinking about it and around it and seeing if I can learn anything from it.

I followed up this comment by asking her to clarify the part prayer has to play in theological reflection. Her response revealed that, like Annette, she understands it to involve a two-way process:

Well to me prayer is lifting situations to God. And so theological reflection is also, to a degree, lifting a situation to God but it’s thinking it through. Does that make sense? And prayer is a two-way conversation so, I mean, we, in our, um, in our culture very often in church and what have you, you hear ‘we’re going to do the prayers’ whether it’s intercessions or confession or adoration and it’s all very much us to God, but actually there is a conversation and it’s a two-way thing. And if we’re actually going to be prepared to listen to God then perhaps that is partly what theological reflection is. It’s a listening as well.

I then asked her how she thinks God speaks to her when she prays and she said that it is through ‘prompting’. I probed further and she said that this prompting involves ‘guiding our thought’ and ‘guiding through scripture’. For Jacqui, then, prayerful attentiveness involves listening to scripture but also having her thoughts guided in some other way. I will return to what Jacqui might have meant when she spoke about God guiding her thought in the conclusion to this chapter and in the theological reflection that follows it. For now it suffices to say that her comments helped me to negotiate a threshold that sees prayer and a disposition towards God as being important dimensions in theological reflection.

Validating the subjective threshold concept

Finally I suggested to the focus group that a threshold in understanding about theological reflection involves a subjective turn. As I was asking Jacqui about listening to God in theological reflection, Gina made the following interjection:

Sometimes it comes through listening to yourself and your thoughts that preoccupy you; and spiritually to pay attention to those. Why is this thing getting at me? Whether it be positive or negative. And then I hold that and I kind of have it there at the back of my mind and then as Jacqui says you might get another word that relates to it; or you might get an affirmation from somebody else that throws a similar sort of light on the situation and then when a number of circumstances come together you might act and then get a blessing and think yes I’ve got it.

For Gina, then, listening in theological reflection involves paying attention to thoughts that ‘preoccupy’ her. As we began to talk about subjectivity, she made a link between this attentiveness and the practice of Ignatian spirituality which, she said, leads her to a ‘safe place’. I was surprised by the comment and sought clarification by asking whether theological reflection always leads to such a safe place. Her answer was an emphatic ‘no’ and the reason she gave was that it leads to critical self-examination, a response that drew agreement from the rest of the group. The notion that there is a subjective threshold concept to be negotiated in theological reflection resonated with my co-researchers. As I have already suggested (p. 112) they saw critical subjectivity as an important aspect of the LMC. They agreed that negotiation of the subjective threshold removes short-circuits that arise out of uncritical or unacknowledged engagement with the internal *habitus* or disposition of faith.

Limitations

The final focus group helped to validate and develop further my understanding of threshold concepts in theological reflection among the students. Analysis of the individual tutor interviews had facilitated the inclusion of data that pointed to the dispositional, spiritual and subjective voices in theological reflection. With the identification of the five threshold concepts

outlined above I had made a decisive move towards a conclusion to the research project. Some important limitations remained, however.

These include some of the ones set out at the end of Chapter 6 (pp. 102-3): the fieldwork was carried out among the LMC students and tutors and my findings are not generalizable beyond that context; I have not investigated such factors as maturation or personality; and in relating each of the threshold concepts to the work of Meyer and Land (2003) I have shown that the portals in understanding exhibit some but not all of their defining characteristics. I return briefly to these shortcomings in my concluding chapter.

For now there is another outstanding issue to be explored. I have suggested that the spiritual dimension in theological reflection involves a two-way conversation of prayer and attentiveness to an internally held disposition or *habitus*. Whilst Annette and students such as Jacqui clearly spoke about the formation of such an ‘internal voice’ and its importance for the theologically reflective conversation, they also seemed to be referring to more than that when they spoke about the prompting or guidance by God or the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, as I engage in theological reflection on my findings, I turn my attention to what this further dimension might be and its implications for my understanding of theological reflection.

Part 4 – Conclusions

Chapter 8 – Further Reflection: Suspending the Conversation

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8. 26).

Introduction

In this final part of the thesis I draw some conclusions. In the current chapter I engage in some further theological reflection on my findings, focussing on my own negotiation of what I have called the spiritual threshold concept. To do this I begin by speaking in the subjective voice and asking how my own tacitly held *habitus* of faith had come to be formed in such a way as to exclude the two-way prayerful conversation that was significant for many of the students. I focus particularly on the way in which my understanding of the Holy Spirit has changed over time, and how a Pauline incorporative model has helped me to see the importance of a contemplative moment in theological reflection. This facilitates an understanding of theological reflection as a conversation in ‘counterpoint’ (Coakley, 2013, pp. 88-9). In Chapter 9 I switch the focus from my own journey with theological reflection back to that of the students as I draw my final conclusions.

Taming the Spirit

Charismatic roots

I begin, then, with a turn to the subjective and the issue of how I had come to be dismissive of the spiritual dimension in LMC students’ theological reflection. The self-examination begins with a return to some of the autobiographical details I alluded to in Chapter 1 (pp. 5-8). My rediscovery of faith as a teenager within the Evangelical tradition of the Church of England was followed when I was in my twenties by an encounter with the Charismatic Renewal. For me and for my peers, spiritual gifts, answered prayer and heightened experiences of the Holy Spirit in worship were important. These experiences of the Spirit were, for us, a source of authority that was above and beyond the authority of the wider church; God, it seemed, spoke directly to us, and experience of the Holy Spirit aided our interpretation of scripture and experience.

Along with the crude biblicism I described in Chapter 1 I was soon to reject this charismatic spirituality. This was partly due to my inability to live the lifestyle my peers and I espoused, partly to an air of unreality, and partly to the disillusionment that attended unanswered prayer. At the same time my newfound interest in theological reflection provided a pathway to academic achievement that compensated for my childhood educational humiliations.

Theological reflection, understood as a cognitive process, rather than spiritual discernment, became the method I used to interpret experience; in so doing it became part of my identity and was accompanied by a degree of hubris. It also distanced me from the realities on which I was reflecting. This was why I had to reread the data I collected from Annette and some of the students so many times; their mention of the ‘voice of God’ or the ‘Holy Spirit’ reminded me of what I regarded as an immature, naïve stage in my own journey of faith and so it did not seem to qualify as theological reflection.

Experience had taken me into liminal space. On the one hand I had become deeply mistrustful of language about the Spirit but on the other I had an inchoate but unacknowledged suspicion that there must be more to theological reflection than the merely cognitive. I had to find some way of dealing with this liminal existence; I could not simply avoid the issue. Straightforward retreat to the pre-liminal territory of charismatic spirituality accompanied by crude biblicism was equally untenable. Unconsciously, then, I adopted a strategy of temporizing by finding a way of extending my stay in the liminal space.

Pneumatology unhelpfully reshaped

The temporizing strategy involved a taming of the Spirit. This taming was facilitated as I developed a ‘linear’ understanding of the Trinity (Coakley, 2103, pp. 111-2) that was rooted in John’s gospel and Acts and had its primary salvific focus on the Father-Son relationship. The Holy Spirit’s role was the Johannine one of the *paraklete* who guides, counsels and enables Christians. The account of Pentecost in Acts 2 was significant for this pneumatology and provided it with an ecclesiological context. The coming of the Holy Spirit formed and continues to form the church. Thus I saw the Spirit’s activity as being confined to certain ‘core church’ (Hütter, 2000), liturgical (Kavanagh, 1984), or eucharistic practices (Chandler, 2010).

This is not to say that my negotiation of the spiritual threshold concept means that I have come to see this pneumatology as being inherently flawed. It is more that it caused an imbalance or a blockage that resulted in a form of ‘discrete believing’ (Le Cornu 2005); for me the Spirit’s activity had become restricted to discrete areas of life governed by the structures and hierarchy of the church. The pervasive threshold needed to be negotiated so that the Holy Spirit could be allowed into other areas of life, especially my practice of theological reflection.

Pauline pneumatology

The Johannine-Acts model of the work of the Spirit is not the only one in the New Testament. There is also a Pauline model that is focussed on Romans 8.12-27 (cf. Galatians 4.4-7) in which the Spirit plays a more primary role in incorporating believers into the life of God through

prayer (Coakley, 2013, pp. 111-115). It involves the Holy Spirit entering into the liminal human experiences that trigger theological reflection.

Spiritual adoption and habitus

Paul begins by referring back to a pre-liminal state in which human beings are indebted to the 'flesh' (Romans 8.12-13). Such indebtedness in Romans refers specifically to legalism or paganism but by implication to any human attempt to bypass a Spirit led engagement with God. My purely cognitive attempts to master theological reflection could be seen to fit into such a category. Such 'deeds of the body' need to be 'put to death' (8.13). There must be a reorientation of *habitus*. This reorientation is a willed response on the part of believers to the grace of God rather than an unwanted or unwelcome invasion by the Spirit (Fee, 1994, p. 556). It involves both the agency of the believer and the activity of the Spirit as the believer is led by the Spirit into liminal space in which spiritual adoption takes place (8.14).

It is liminal because believers are neither here nor there, on a journey (Bowen, 1996, p. 120), betwixt and between present realities and a future, eschatological telos. The *habitus* is reoriented; the Holy Spirit testifies alongside the human Spirit that believers have become coheirs with Christ as they cry 'Abba! Father!' (8.15). Paul uses two legal images to underline the point (Black, 1973, p. 114; Bruce, 1985, p. 157). The first is from Roman law where adopted children are granted the same inheritance rights as natural children; and the second is from Jewish law where two witnesses establish the validity of a claim. There is resonance here with the participative aspect of my research. Prayer and the activity of the Holy Spirit are not solitary activities; the human spirit and the Holy Spirit testify together as believers are caught up into the life of God 'in a circle of response to the Father's call' (Coakley, 2013, pp. 111-112).

Participation in suffering

But there is an 'already-but-not yet' to this inheritance (Fee, 1994, p. 561; 571). The promise of future glory is contingent on participation in the sufferings of Christ (Romans 8.17b-18). We live in liminal space. Here the notion of pervasiveness comes into play. It is not only believers, but the whole of creation that eagerly anticipates its eschatological, Christological telos (8.19-22). The reorientation of *habitus* anticipates the redemption of all creation.

Spirit-led prayer and theological reflection in the liminal space are not simply a retreat to the subjective; they are linked to the whole of creation and thus have social, economic and ecological implications. It is complex. All the voices in the reflective dialogue groan as if with labour pains, longing for redemption. It is for those who have 'the first-fruits' of the Spirit to engage in prayerful theological reflection that is attentive to these groans; it is their

improvisation on the ‘raw material’ of *habitus* reoriented by adoption as children of God (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72; Graham, 1996, pp. 102-3). But such is the complexity of creation’s groaning that it goes beyond human language or powers of cognition. The cacophony of voices is beyond us.

For Annette, the tutor whose interview provided the key to my understanding of much of the data gathered from the students, theological reflection involves ‘letting go and letting God’. Amid the busy-ness of life and ministry there is a cacophony of voices and she needs to find the space to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. St Paul seems to have known the need to suspend the conversation so that he could be open to the same Spirit. For him the whole of creation groans as if it is suffering labour pains; the scope of theological reflection is all-pervasive and it is complex and problematic. Little wonder, then, that ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought’. This is a letting go of words, a letting in of the Holy Spirit. As the conversation is suspended, the Spirit intercedes for us ‘with sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8.26).

Contemplative prayer and theological reflection

A conversation in counterpoint

The negotiation of the spiritual threshold concept has made me see that at the heart of theological reflection there needs to be a contemplative moment. Attentiveness to the canonical voice includes the discernment of Christ’s presence in the world through contemplative practices (Marsh, 2006; Leach, 2007). It is a kind of blanking or ‘noetic slippage’ (Coakley, 2013, p. 13); a suspension of the desire for cognitive mastery of the reflective conversation; a making-of-space so that the Holy Spirit can be heard; a ‘letting go and letting God’. It is a moment in which the reflector moves beyond the ‘mundane’ to the ‘transcendental’ (Winter, 2014, p. 6) as the Spirit within intercedes with sighs beyond words.

The contemplative suspension of the conversation helps towards the resolution of an issue that has repeatedly reasserted itself as the research has progressed. Which voice in the theologically reflective conversation has priority? Does the canonical voice trump the ethnographic? Is it the liberationist cry of the praxis voice that is the ultimate authority or should the reflector’s own subjectivity hold sway? I suggested in Chapter 4 (pp. 59-63) that the mutually critical conversation method seeks to hold the partners together in a dynamic tension; but I also pointed to the danger that this might result in a meaningless cacophony. I now suggest a different musical metaphor; that of counterpoint (Coakley, 2013, pp. 88-9).

Contemplative prayer in the Spirit opens the reflector(s) up to the inter-relatedness of all things. It chimes with the way Buddhist mindfulness practices can be related to action research (Winter, 2014). There is deep listening in the Spirit so that theological reflection takes place on every level and, in Pauline terms, it is the whole cosmos that groans in eager anticipation, as multiple conversation partners come together in the dialogue. Counterpoint suggests writing or playing melodies in conjunction with one another; and so the voices come together to form a symphony which may be intricate and complex but is not devoid of meaning. Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) sees *habitus* as being ‘collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor’. Contemplative suspension changes the perspective as the Holy Spirit is invited to conduct the conversation in counterpoint. The outcome is no simplistic synthesis; there is no attempt to turn the variations into a single tune. As the reflector(s) take up the cognitive aspect of the dialogue once again they remain in the liminal space where they seek out further rounds of prayer, reflection, and learning.

Reconnecting with theology’s dual telos

In Chapter 5 (pp. 67-72) as I drew parallels between the reflective dialogue and action research, I suggested that purposive scholarly endeavour and attention to the formation of a *habitus* of faith come together to comprise the dual ‘essence, agenda and telos of theology’ (Farley, 2001, p. 44). Recognizing a contemplative aspect to theological reflection has helped me to reconnect the two sides of the equation. Theological reflection can never be ‘solely a cognitive process divorced from the contours of spiritual discernment’ (Leach, 2007, p. 28). The contemplative moment allows space for such discernment. This is not to attenuate the cognitive; my desire to learn and engage in theological reflection endures. The need is to put my ‘love for learning’ into the context of a ‘desire for God’ (Leclercq, 1978).

The breach in theology’s dual telos that was part of my own inner journey of faith has a parallel in church history. This is understood by Farley (2001, 34-9) to have its roots in the medieval epoch with the rise of scholasticism as distinct from the contemplative asceticism of the monasteries; now, theology as *habitus* coexisted with and complemented theology as a ‘science’ to be investigated in the schools (Leclercq, 1978, pp. 1-9). From the Enlightenment to the present the two became separated and the divide was widened by a fragmentation of theological education into systematics, church history, biblical studies and ministerial practice (Fulkerson, 2012).

Engaging in contemplative prayer as part of theological reflection reconnects two partners that rightly belong together, and in so doing transforms theological reflection and my own praxis. The moment of suspension allows the pray-er(s)/reflector(s) to contact the deepest ‘ontological

levels' of their identity and rise beyond the 'mundane' to the 'transcendental' or spiritual; it connects them with their deeply held *habitus* of faith or disposition towards God. The Pauline term 'adoption' becomes apt as pray-er(s) adopt afresh their own deeply held beliefs and therefore listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

A conversation on the margins

A criticism can be levelled at the role I have suggested that contemplative prayer has to play in theological reflection. It involves the letting go or blanking of desire for power or mastery through cognitive processes. What, though, of the powerless and the marginalized? The liberative aspect of theological reflection seeks a thorough cognitive exploration of current realities and the transformation of oppressive structures through interdisciplinary analysis, engagement with the canonical voice, or both. Letting go of the desire for such transformative mastery runs the risk of leaving reflectors stuck in their oppressed, marginalized state. The suspension, however, is only temporary; cognitive processes remain important and every voice in the conversation needs to be heard. The contemplative turn in theological reflection is a temporary interruption, a moment when the conversation is suspended and the pray-er(s)/reflector(s) allow the Spirit into the liminal space so that they can be 'caught up' in the divine life and thus be attentive to God's voice. This is very far from leaving the reflector(s)/pray-er(s) stuck with injustice.

My experiences of the Charismatic Renewal in a youth fellowship may have been naïve. They nevertheless led me and my peers to believe that we could discern God's voice in the midst of experience. This meant that we were able to bypass church structures and authority. There may have been all manner of attendant dangers but at least it felt 'liberative'. We were on the margins of the church; a position often occupied by groups that claim direct access to God through charismatic or contemplative practices. The marginalization of Montanism in the second century represents an early example of a pattern that has repeated itself through history (Coakley, 2013, pp. 121-126). Claims to be able to discern the voice of God in theological reflection do not always sit comfortably with hierarchical, authoritative models of ecclesial practice.

There is an extent to which LMC students live a marginal existence. They are preparing for ministries that are betwixt and between the call of all disciples to follow Christ on the one hand and the call of the ordained clergy on the other (Chandler, 2010). This makes the contemplative conversation in counterpoint an apt approach to their practice of theological reflection. It facilitates attention to the canonical voice and thus to the practices of the church and its

hierarchical structures; but it also allows for the interruption of the Spirit providing a liberative opportunity for novelty, creativity and transformative praxis.

Conclusion

I have reflected in this chapter on how my negotiation of the spiritual threshold concept can be understood theologically. This is not to say that it is a portal through which only I have to pass. The ability of the LMC students to describe the prominent role prayer plays in their practice shows that it is also important for them to be connected with the spiritual dimensions of theological reflection even as they negotiate portals in its cognitive aspects. A Pauline, incorporative model of the work of the Holy Spirit helps to make the connections. It shows how a contemplative interruption in the theologically reflective conversation can bring the Spirit into liminal space, catching those doing the reflecting up into the life of God. Theological reflection no longer feels like a cacophony but becomes a complex conversation in counterpoint.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

Introduction

I begin this final chapter by restating the question: are there threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students, and if so what are they? The short answer is ‘yes and there are five of them’: they are the interpretive, complexifying, pervasive, spiritual and subjective threshold concepts (see Chapter 7, p. 112-3). My conclusion, however, is more complex. In what follows I sum up by recapping on the socially constructed nature of threshold concepts and their purpose in removing blockages in understanding; I make a modest contribution to the debate about their characteristics; I set out how threshold concepts can help to define theological reflection among LMC students; and I end with some final comments about pedagogy on the LMC and my own journey through the research.

Threshold concepts as social constructions

In Chapter 3 (pp. 39-40) I said that I see threshold concepts in theological reflection on the LMC as being socially constructed by the students and tutors. I also pointed to my role in such construction as interpreter and researcher. To use Perkins’s (2006) phraseology we play an ‘epistemic game’ the rules of which we negotiate. The scissor game we played in the final focus group (see Chapter 7, p. 113) made the point well. Some of us ‘got’ the rules of the game but others did not. The fact that the point was focussed on the position of our legs rather than the scissors was a portal to understanding for those who knew the rules of the game but it was a blockage for those who did not. Crossing the threshold – understanding about legs being crossed or uncrossed – removed the blockage in understanding.

For students and tutors on the LMC negotiation of threshold concepts in theological reflection involves the removal of blockages in understanding the rules of the epistemic game. We negotiate the rules of the game; as researcher I interpret them. The complexifying threshold concept serves as an example. For some other group the rules may involve arriving at simple, generalizable instructions about how to think or act in the light of experience. This is not the case with the LMC. Theological reflection as it is understood on the programme – at least according to my interpretation of it – involves complexifying the phenomena being explored. This concept may prove puzzling for some in which case it proves to be a blockage in understanding theological reflection; or it may be grasped and thus serve as a portal to understanding. The blockage is removed when students negotiate the complexifying threshold concept.

Removal of blockages in theological reflection involves learning that goes beyond the mere accumulation of facts. It leads to knowledge that is performative, proactive and transformative of practice. Once players understand the rules of the game the scissors can be passed on knowingly and the actions of others appropriately interpreted. The research has not shown that negotiation of thresholds is related to progressive maturation but the complexifying threshold concept does suggest that for LMC students to engage in effective theological reflection they must move beyond dualistic right-wrong conceptions of knowledge (Perry, 1999 [1970]). The assumptions behind this conclusion sit uncomfortably with cultures in which obedience to scripture or tradition is valued; my understanding of theological reflection, nevertheless does involve obedience to an ongoing commitment to wrestle with scripture and tradition.

Characteristics of threshold concepts

In Chapter 3 I set out some characteristics of threshold concepts as identified by Meyer and Land in their seminal paper (2003). These have been prominent in the research. A significant contribution towards knowledge that the project has to make concerns the extent to which these characteristics can form the basis of a theory of threshold concepts that can be empirically tested in practical theology and across the disciplines. The contribution must be seen as cautious and modest; it emerges from the unique context of the LMC and represents no more than proposals that might be followed up in further research.

All five of the threshold concepts that I have found in theological reflection among LMC students are *transformative* and their negotiation can prove *troublesome*. If these characteristics cannot be shown, my proposal is that they should not be seen as thresholds. The discussion in Chapters 6 and 7 shows that once thresholds have been negotiated it transforms the way students and tutors view the world. Faith and tradition simply do not look the same once it is accepted that texts are interpretations of realities that must be interpreted anew in each and every context; the terrain looks different to those who have an eye for its complexity; life changes once the pervasiveness of the reflective dialogue is grasped; I view theological reflection differently now I have seen beyond the merely cognitive; and the turning of the reflective lens upon the subjective self transforms how I relate to the experience being explored.

Their negotiation is undoubtedly troublesome and so is often preceded by an experience of *liminality*. The rich man (Mark 10.17-27, see Chapter 3) accurately counted the cost of transforming his lifestyle to become a disciple. Theological reflection involves bringing deeply held views about what is ultimately valuable and meaningful into conversation with experience. Negotiating thresholds in its practice often leads those doing the reflecting to confront the possibility that they may be wrong on the profoundest level (Hull, 1985). This makes threshold

concepts in theological reflection particularly problematic and costly, makes the stay in liminal space where students are neither here nor there more troublesome, and necessitates the adoption of the coping strategies described in Chapter 6 (pp. 83-4, 86-7, 95, 99-100).

I also propose that to be seen as a threshold in theological reflection the apprehension of a concept must be *irreversible*. The troublesome nature of the five threshold concepts makes this characteristic problematic, however. Once a portal has truly been negotiated it is difficult to see how students could return to earlier ways of thinking. I will never forget how to swim. At the same time, however, repeated rounds of theological reflection in the midst of pastoral ministry have potential to be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually exhausting. This makes restriction, temporizing, and prolonged stays in liminal space more likely. My own dalliance in relation to the spiritual threshold concept is a case in point. It was simply too difficult to excavate the past internal processes that had separated the cognitive and spiritual dimensions of theological reflection until analysis of the research data forced me to do so.

This has implications for pedagogy on the LMC. One person's temporizing, I argued in Chapter 6 (p. 101), is another's scaffolding. Sometimes tutors will need to provide students with 'scaffolding' to help them cope in the liminal space. At other times they will need to provide the appropriate 'triggers' to move students beyond strategies of temporizing. A great deal of practical wisdom is required to know which is appropriate for particular students at particular moments during training; to challenge students when they are not yet ready to negotiate a threshold will prove to be counterproductive. At this point a boundary in the research is reached; I have yet to explore what form such practical wisdom might take but I propose to do so with LMC tutors as part of the follow-up to my project.

I have not concluded that Meyer and Land's other two characteristics – the *integrative* and *bounded* nature of threshold concepts – have to be shown for a concept to be considered a threshold in theological reflection on the LMC. Exploring how they relate to the threshold concepts I have found, however, has served a descriptive purpose. The negotiation of the threshold concepts helps students to integrate disparate pieces of knowledge about the process of theological reflection. The spiritual threshold concept, for example, helped me to integrate the spiritual and cognitive aspects of theological reflection. The complexifying threshold concept, however, suggests that the outcome of theological reflection is often far from integrative and that students need to recognize the necessity of living with complexity and disjunction.

I argued in Chapter 6 that the thresholds I had identified could not be used to establish the conceptual boundaries that separate theological reflection from other sub-disciplines and subject areas; there are too many overlaps for that to be possible. Exploration of threshold concepts among the LMC students does, however, help to define theological reflection.

Using threshold concepts to define theological reflection

In Chapter 4 I set out how I see theological reflection as a mutually critical dialogue between four voices based on the canonical, ethnographic, subjective and praxis models. The effectiveness of theological reflection depends on the way in which students or tutors attend to these voices. Each voice may serve either as a portal to renewed understanding or transformed praxis or as a blockage that impairs the reflective dialogue. My findings suggested that this is particularly true of the canonical voice. Traditional texts form a kind of threshold. For those students who recognize that texts need to be interpreted anew in each context, potential exists for them to open up new ways of thinking or practising. The way I used Mark 10.17-27 parabolically in Chapter 3, for example, opened up my understanding of threshold concepts.

It is equally possible, however, for the text to serve as a blockage. Where interpretation of the text is seen as being fixed and generalizable it is likely to be privileged in a way that drowns out the other partners in the conversation and leaves the reflector stuck in a preliminal way of thinking or practising. Negotiation of the interpretive threshold concept removes this blockage.

An opposite danger is that one of the voices will be left out of the conversation. The students and most of my colleagues, for example, did not pay adequate attention to the praxis voice. Negotiation of the pervasive threshold would enable them to attend to injustices in current practices. Until I analysed the data I attended to the canonical voice in a solely cognitive way as I grappled to juxtapose biblical and other texts; I came to see the significance of contemplative prayer in the reflective dialogue as a self-reflexive turn led me through the spiritual threshold concept.

Threshold concepts and pedagogy on the LMC

My hope is that as I share my findings and conclusions with the students and tutors we will engage in further negotiation about the nature of theological reflection and thresholds in its practice. My proposal, therefore, is that my colleagues and I should see pedagogy on the LMC as a form of participative research. Attentiveness to one another and to the students will help us to identify and clarify thresholds in correlating faith and experience, and so to engage more effectively in theological reflection. The project does not end with the completion of my thesis.

The ongoing project begins with a further proposal. I have something of significance to share with the tutors and students in relation to the pervasive threshold concept. Their theological reflection was devoid of the liberationist cry of the praxis voice. A hermeneutic of suspicion that critiques current practice, confronts injustice and transforms praxis was almost entirely absent from what they shared in the focus groups and individual interviews. Negotiating the pervasive threshold concept involves recognizing that theological reflection goes beyond the narrow confines of personal piety to pervade the economic, social, political and ecclesial. My challenge to my colleagues and those in training is to ask more searching questions about what it means to be Anglican ministers in 'middle England'. How can our theological reflection transform church and society to reflect more closely the values of God's kingdom?

My journey through the research

My conclusions are not only about pedagogy on the LMC; they also concern my own learning. In my introduction to Part 2 of the thesis (p. 28) I set out how I approached my exploration of the LMC with the 'binocular vision' (Clark, 1993, pp. 19-26) of threshold concepts and theological reflection. These represent two major strands in the research and there has been an ebb and flow between them as I have told the story of my journey through the project. As I come to my conclusion I realize that there is a third strand which is of equal importance – that of self-reflexivity. Critical subjectivity is at the heart of practical theology and is also central to the aims of a Professional Doctorate; it leads to 'cognitive disclosure' (Bennett and Lyall, 2014, p.198) and it is through a thoughtful engagement with self and context that I have learnt (Bennett and Graham, 2008, p. 41).

I originally thought that I would be looking at why it was that other people – LMC students – struggled to reflect theologically. That remained an important aspect but I became increasingly aware of my own struggle with the practice. Learning became a two-way process. The students and one of the tutors constructed their theological reflection in a way that I found difficult to fathom (see Chapters 7 and 8). They used the language of prayer and attention to the Holy Spirit. Analysis of the data and reflection on the findings led me to renegotiate my understanding as I crossed the spiritual threshold. Construction of thresholds in theological reflection is a corporate activity that I do in cooperation with the LMC community. It is not, as I assumed at the outset of the research, about trying to discover why others have difficulty in practising theological reflection.

My research has thus fulfilled the criteria for a Professional Doctorate (Bourner, Bowden and Laing, 2001; Scott et al., 2004). It has made its 'contribution to knowledge' by identifying threshold concepts in theological reflection among LMC students; it has enabled me to evaluate

and transform my own practice and resulted in a change in my professional self-understanding (Bennett and Graham, 2008, p. 34). I am now in a position to share my insights with colleagues and enhance pedagogy and theological reflection on the LMC. I also have the skills set to continue a thoughtful, self-reflexive inquiry into my own practice as a theological educator.

I have been surprised by what I have learnt as I have journeyed through the research. Theological reflection, for me, is no longer a cold, detached activity confined to cognitive processes. It makes connections with the whole of a creation that groans in eager expectation. It involves suspension of thought, a contemplative moment in which the Holy Spirit can be heard and a complex conversation in counterpoint can take place. My opening chapter began with stressing the importance of theological reflection. The teenager who struggles with his sexual identity, the woman who cannot forgive, those who must be a beleaguered church and those who celebrate life's joys, together with the staff and students of the Peterborough Lay Ministry Course are all part of creation's longing to find its purpose in Christ. My closing prayer is that recognizing thresholds in theological reflection, in the midst of complexity, liminality and struggle, will lead them closer to that purpose.

Epilogue – Sunday Afternoon

It is Sunday afternoon and the residential weekend has ended. Lesley, the LMC administrator and I are clearing up. The meeting room is a mess. Tangled strands of wool remain scattered across the floor. The ‘body’ jigsaw puzzle is propped up against a table as a reminder of the LMC students’ strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies. Around the room are the model churches the students made in their team building exercise on Saturday. They are bizarre but wonderful expressions of the imaginations of their creators. Made of card, tape, bubble wrap and other odds and ends they look more like the product of a primary school class than of adults training to be licensed ministers.

But as Lesley and I begin to pull the model churches apart and bin the remains it seems a shame. George certainly thinks so. Alarmed, he demands that we stop our wanton act of vandalism. At least, he asks, can the church his team made be saved? I ask him what on earth he intends do with it. His reply is that he wants to take it home to show his children what he has been doing all weekend; a kind of reverse ‘show and tell’. We laugh and I help him to load the model into the back of his estate car. When we have done so it is just about in one piece, save for the drinking straw cross that had adorned the top of a spire fashioned from the cardboard inner of a kitchen roll.

It is time for some theological reflection. As George drives off I think of the Transfiguration where Peter, intoxicated with the mountain top experience wants to make three shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah (Mark 9.2-8; Matthew 17.1-13; Luke 9.28-36). He wants the experience to be permanent. Likewise George, I muse, wants to make the experience of the weekend last just a little longer by taking his ridiculous creation home.

This, however, does not do George justice. He has been a key participant all weekend. Friday evening’s interactive Bible study raised as many questions as it answered. Perhaps what Paul says about strength in weakness is insightful but do we really like this man with his harsh words about women that outrage some of us however much we try to contextualize them? We do not like the way he bullies the Corinthians either, whatever their shortcomings. We were stimulated on Saturday morning by some theoretical input on teamwork but the church building experience soon put that in its context. Time was short; the teams had to negotiate with their tutors for materials; personalities clashed; tempers became frayed.

Sunday morning saw a discussion on the meaning of the Greek word *diakonia* (Collins, 1990) in the New Testament and its implications for our understanding of ministry in the contemporary

church. We did not agree. Our findings jarred with the experience of some. As we gathered for a final eucharist it seemed there was as much to divide us as to unite us. But as we suspended our conversation we encountered the Holy Spirit. We had engaged in the complexities of our strengths and weaknesses, of teamwork and of the nature of ministry; we had wrestled with the text. It had been a liminal experience but we had engaged in theological reflection.

So my mind leaves the Transfiguration – although I do not think it is entirely irrelevant – and alights on my research, Milton, and the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*. The students and their tutors do not make their way back to Northamptonshire, Rutland and the Soke of Peterborough ‘hand in hand with wandering steps and slow’; George leaves in his Toyota. But he takes his incongruous work of art with him and with it the complex and contradictory fruits of our theological reflection. For George and the other participants in the training weekend, ‘the world is all before them’.

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All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*: Anglicized Ed., 1995. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix 1 – Professional Doctorate Paper 1

Anglia Ruskin University

**Joining in with the Reflective God: Facilitating Theological Reflection in Training
for Licensed Lay Ministry**

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SID: 0214247

**A paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for
the degree of Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology**

Submitted 4th October, 2011

Contents

	Page No
Abstract.....	145
Introduction: a Journey with Theological Reflection.....	146
Some ‘Straw for the Bricks’ in Adult Education.....	147
The Structure of the Lay Ministry Course.....	148
Unearthing Some Questions.....	148
Some Assumptions to Be Explored	150
A Theological Standpoint	150
Innate Preferences and Methodology in Theological Reflection.....	152
The Usefulness of Learning Style Instrumentation ¹²	154
Learning Styles and the Reflective God.....	155
Developmental Theories and Theological Reflection.....	155
Form and Content in Theological Reflection.....	156
The Metaphor of Voice.....	158
Ways of Knowing and Ways of Believing.....	159
Conclusion.....	161
Bibliography.....	162
Appendix One – The Core Foundational Module.....	163
Appendix Two – The <i>Living Faith</i> Modules.....	166
Appendix Three – Faithful Ministry in Context.....	168

Abstract

This paper begins with its author's journey with theological reflection. A question then arises from his current context: why is it that a training course for licensed lay ministry that he has co-written only seems to have achieved limited success in facilitating theological reflection among its students? Three assumptions are explored. The first is that theological reflection is related to personality type or learning style and that any limitation in its success at facilitating theological reflection is attributable to a failure to adopt a large enough variety of methodological approaches. The second is that ability to reflect theologically is arrived at by a developmental process through time and students are at different positions on this sequential progression. The suggestion is made that personality profiling, learning style instrumentation and developmental theory are useful tools in enabling metacognition but they are argued to provide limited insight into the course's success in enabling theological reflection. Arguing that theological reflection should be seen in terms of participation in the mission of the reflective God, the author concludes by suggesting that the way students have been nurtured in the Christian faith is more likely to have an effect on their skills in theological reflection. The work of Belenky et al. (1996 [1986]) and Le Cornu (2005, 2009) is then drawn on to explore the metaphor of voice and to suggest that attention to the way tacitly held frameworks of faith come to be externalized may be of key significance in facilitating theological reflection.

The length of the paper is 6,960 words excluding references.

Introduction: a Journey with Theological Reflection

There has been a well-documented shift in recent decades in the focus of practical and pastoral theology. Where the emphasis was once on the application of the theological curriculum to ministerial practice it has now moved towards theological reflection (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 2-5; Thompson, Pattison and Thompson, 2008, pp. 17-18). This has been characterized as a movement towards the correlation of the experience of theological reflectors with the sources of the Christian tradition in such a way that implications are drawn out for Christian living (Kinast, 2000, p.1). In the first part of this paper I will draw on my experience over the last twenty-five years to suggest that a significant number of people find this approach to theological education a difficult concept to grasp. I will then describe my part in writing and delivering a training course for licensed lay ministry, an aim of which has been to facilitate theological reflection among its students. From this context some questions will arise that will provide the starting point for my doctoral studies. In the second part of my paper I will begin to address these questions, looking at some assumptions that lie behind the course and assessing their usefulness in facilitating effective theological reflection.

My journey with the discipline began towards the end of the 1980s under the tuition of Laurie Green, the recently retired Bishop of Bradwell and writer of *Let's Do Theology* (2009 [1990]). At the time I was a student on the Aston Training Scheme, a now defunct part-time training programme for Anglican ordinands, of which Green was Principal. This was a privileged place to be; Green was in the process of writing *Let's Do Theology* and he explored his approach to theological reflection with students on the course. A seminar during which he introduced us to his 'doing theology cycle' (Green, 2009, pp. 19-38) was an epiphany for me. Then in my mid-twenties I had left school aged sixteen and had little in the way of academic background or experience. I was working for a firm of chartered accountants and making any link between my work and faith or theological studies seemed difficult. Now, I had an approach to doing theology that involved a continual 'intertwining of action and reflection' (Green, 2009, p. 6). This meant that I could explore issues arising out of my context surrounding financial ethics, reflect on them and although my lowly position as a clerk limited the extent of any action, I could move towards a response. I could begin to reflect theologically.

When I discussed these newfound insights with some of my fellow students I was surprised to find that they did not share my enthusiasm. One, for example, a theology graduate, said he had found it too shallow. Another, who had a science-based PhD admitted to finding it completely baffling. As I moved on to theological college similar encounters with some of my colleagues suggested that, whilst they were at home with traditional subjects on the theological curriculum such as biblical studies, doctrine or church history, when they were asked to write a theological

reflection on a pastoral placement they felt completely at sea. When I reflect on two decades in parish ministry, moreover, I find myself frustrated at the number of people who simply seem unable to correlate the insights of faith with experience in any way that might affect how they live their daily lives.

Some 'Straw for the Bricks' in Adult Education

This has left me with a passion for enabling others to engage in theological reflection. In a seminal paper also written in the late 1980s, Pattison (1989) drew on the text of Exodus to suggest that students were being expected to do theological reflection without the appropriate explanation or resources; it was as if they were being asked to make 'bricks without straw' (Exodus 5.16). My passion has been to provide 'some straw for the bricks' by giving people explanation, education and resources to facilitate theological reflection.

For the last decade the opportunity for me to do this has been provided by my involvement in adult education in the Diocese of Peterborough. My journey with the adult education team will form the context of this paper and will itself be offered as an example of the kind of theological reflection advocated by my erstwhile teacher Laurie Green. It will involve working through a cycle of experience, exploration, response and action leading to a renewed situation or experience (Green, 2009, p. 24). I was appointed Director of Training for Pastoral Assistants² in the diocese in 2003 at around the same time that I embarked on a Masters programme in pastoral theology with the Cambridge Theological Federation. The Masters programme, together with my earlier experience on the Aston Training Scheme led me to approach my involvement in lay training with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. Something about the training we offered at the time did not seem quite right and seemed worthy of exploration.

The Diocese of Peterborough trains people for three distinct licensed lay ministries: lay pastoral ministers (LPMs), licensed evangelists (LEs) and readers. In 2003 those training for these ministries studied together for a year on an introduction to theological study called *Common Ground*. Thereafter, LPMs and LEs had a further year of training that was bespoke to their own ministries while readers trained for a further two years. This resulted in considerable overlap between what was taught in the bespoke training for the three ministries and it was felt that this was not a good use of valuable resources.

As the adult education team explored further it seemed that there was another problem associated with this pattern of training. Unwittingly, we had set up courses that separated theory from practice. At least in the case of LPMs and LEs the theoretical content was largely

² In 2008, pastoral assistants were renamed 'lay pastoral ministers' (Chandler, 2010, p.237).

confined to the *Common Ground* course while the second bespoke year was skewed towards practical ‘hints and helps’ for ministry. This militated against theological reflection that integrated practice and theory. We concluded that if we were to provide straw for the bricks we would need to find a more integrated approach that would train LPMs, LEs and readers to be reflective practitioners of Christian ministry, and the Lay Ministry Course (LMC) was conceived.

The Structure of the Lay Ministry Course

Our aim has been to structure the LMC in such a way that it facilitates the desired interweaving of theory and practice. In place of *Common Ground* a two year core foundational module consisting of six study days and two residential weekends has been put in place (see appendix 1). The emphasis of this part of the course is on personal, spiritual and vocational development but it has also been designed to facilitate the drawing together of students’ learning. After each of the study days and residential weekends the students are set a ‘reflective task’. These are assessed on how well they show integration between the themes of the core foundational module and insights gained from other components of the LMC.

There are two further components. First, academic development is stressed in ‘open modules’ each of which consists of six sessions and an assignment. These cover the areas that might be expected to appear on a traditional theological curriculum (see appendix 2). Readers have to do nine modules over three years; LPMs and LEs have to do six over two years. These modules are open to people who are not studying for licensed lay ministry under a separate diocesan programme known as *Living Faith*. Secondly, each ministry has its own specialized modules that run over two or three years. These involve twelve modules for LPMs and LEs and eighteen for readers.

Unearthing Some Questions

The tutors for the open and specialized modules are given a brief, as far as possible, to root learning in the practical experience of the students. This gives rise to a significant question: how successful are the tutors in doing this? They are drawn mainly from clergy across the diocese that hold expertise in a given area. The reality is that some of them completed their theological training some years ago and there may be a limited extent to which they are aware of current trends such as the turn towards reflective practice that I referred to in my introduction to this paper.

In July 2011 the Coordinator of Adult Education moved into a new area of ministry and I was appointed Principal of the LMC and Continuing Ministerial Education Officer. This means a

subtle shift in my role towards overseeing the ministerial development of the clergy and so, to return to Pattison's image, I have responsibility for providing the tutors with some straw for the bricks of theological reflection. I also have a renewed responsibility for the LMC students, however, so my question is not confined to the effectiveness of the tutors. The extent to which the course as a whole is effective in facilitating theological reflection will form the central question at this stage of my research.

Two significant moments in the LMC programme provide material that will help towards an answer to this question. These come at the end of the first year and shortly before licensing when each of the students participates in a one-to-one interview or 'development conversation' with either the Principal or the Director of Studies. During this conversation the student's progress is reviewed and, in the case of the first interview, areas for development in the second year are discussed. A summary of the discussion is then completed by the interviewer. Subject to obtaining the necessary ethics approval from Anglia Ruskin University, the development interview summaries together with the reflective tasks carried out by students on the core foundational module will form the basis for my future research into the effectiveness of the course.

For the purposes of the current paper I can only make some provisional and anecdotal observations based on the development conversations I conducted in 2010 and 2011. These suggest a mixed picture. Some students have undoubtedly shown a clear understanding of theological reflection, having grasped the concept of reflective practice as the foundation for Christian life and ministry. Others, however, have yet to make these connections. When asked to reflect on a study day or weekend these students typically report on what happened and the feelings that were evoked, but seldom connect this with what they have been learning or with their daily lives. For these people the course has yet to provide some straw for the bricks.

If my albeit anecdotal and provisional observations suggest that the course has only achieved limited success in facilitating theological reflection, a further question springs to mind. Why is this the case? Is it because of an innate lack of reflective ability among some of the students? Any suggestion that some people are innately unable to learn a particular skill, especially one as significant as the ability to reflect, hardly seems palatable. So is the course achieving only limited success because the methodological and pedagogical approaches we have adopted are not appropriate?

Some Assumptions to Be Explored

I will now begin working towards some answers to these questions. I will do this by exploring three unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions that we brought to the writing of the curriculum. The first is that theological reflection is related to personality profiles or learning styles and that effective practice will be facilitated by matching methodological approaches to students' styles or preferences. The second is that all human beings have an innate capacity to reflect theologically but that such capacity is related to a normative, sequential, time-related process, and pedagogy on the LMC will involve facilitating movement along this developmental path. Finally, having argued that overuse of learning styles, personality profiling and developmental theories on the LMC programme might prove to be unhelpful, I will turn to the assumption that nurture and discipleship in the Christian Faith have a significant role to play in hindering or facilitating theological reflection.

A Theological Standpoint

My exploration of these three assumptions will be conducted from a particular theological perspective. Our starting point for reflection when writing the new curriculum was the *missio Dei*, God's mission to the world (Heywood, 2011, pp. 50-67). At the time it was being suggested that the Church of England's mission in the postmodern context involves discerning what God is doing in the world and joining in (Williams, 2003). Hull (1985, pp. 200-38) suggests that adult Christian learning is best facilitated when it is recognized that God learns but does so in a way that differs from human learning because God learns perfectly. This opened up to us the intriguing possibility that God also *reflects* perfectly³. When we linked this with participation in the *missio Dei* we conceived of the possibility that our revamped training should aim to facilitate participation on the part of its students in the activity of the reflective God.

This theme would go on to be explored on a study day during which students are introduced to the theology of Vanstone for whom creation is seen as the kenosis of God, an outpouring of self-giving, divine love (1977, pp. 55-74). Reflection on the phenomenology of love leads Vanstone (1977, pp. 39-54) to recognize that, to be authentic, this outpouring cannot be controlling and must run the risk of being unrequited. That means that the 'power of response' lies with the created and God's creative acts of love, to use Vanstone's language, may result in either 'triumph' or 'tragedy' (1977, pp. 75-99). God's continuing activity in the world involves

³ I recognise that this possibility is as controversial as it is intriguing. If God learns and reflects does this imply that he is not omniscient? Does it suggest that he is imperfect? This is an issue that I will cover more fully further on in my research. For the time being my tentative suggestion is that God learns and reflects as he awaits creation's response to his loving action.

seeking lovingly to redeem those situations where the response has resulted in tragedy. An analogy is drawn from the way in which an artist engages with her painting. A brush stroke may or may not have its intended result, but the artist will painstakingly and lovingly seek to 'redeem' what has not come right until the painting is complete (Vanstone, 1977, p. 64).

It is because God ever waits on the response of creation and then seeks to redeem what has not come right that the *missio Dei* can be understood as involving divine reflection. There is a cycle that resembles Green's pastoral cycle beginning with divine activity, leading onto God's waiting on creation's response and then to redemptive activity. All Christians are called to participate in this redemptive activity by mirroring God's reflective nature and seeking to redeem what has not come right. Licensed ministry (both lay and ordained) may be understood to provide a particular focus for such transformative theological reflection in the Anglican context (Chandler, 2010, pp. 250-1).

The theological stance I will adopt in this paper will draw on some of my previous work to identify what might constitute the redemptive 'brushstrokes' in which licensed ministers and other Christians are called to participate. In the first place they may be seen in Trinitarian terms. The Father's response to human tragedy is the incarnation of the Son whose passion occasions the triumph of resurrection and inaugurates the church as a means through which the Spirit enables participation in God's continuing redemptive purposes in creation (Heywood, 2011, p. 50). The traditions and practices of the church may be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit (Chandler, 2010, pp. 247-9; Hütter, 2000, pp. 32-4) or divine redemptive 'brushstrokes' through which Christians join in with God's mission to bring all things to perfection.

If the traditions and practices of the Christian Faith are seen in this way as the outworking of God's reflective activity in which Christian disciples share, there will be some implications for this paper. It will lead me to conclude that the assumption that theological reflection is related to the way in which Christians have been nurtured in the traditions of the Faith is likely to prove the most fruitful avenue for my research.

Innate Preferences and Methodology in Theological Reflection

First, however, I will explore the assumption that students on the LMC have innate preferences in the ways they reflect and that theological reflection will be facilitated by matching these preferences with methodological approaches. Learning style instrumentation and personality profiling play a prominent role in the LMC programme. On the introductory study day students are introduced to Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) and invited to identify their own style of learning (Coffield et al., 2004, pp. 71-76). Midway through the

course the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) features in a study day and students are encouraged to identify their preferences in relation to its four dichotomies (Coffield et al. 2004, pp. 46-51). Given the LMC's aim of facilitating theological reflection, the inference is that insight into learning style or personality type also offers clues as to students' preferred approach to theological reflection.

If this assumption were valid, it ought to be possible to identify learning styles or personality preferences and demonstrate whether or not they are catered for by the methodological approaches to theological reflection covered on the LMC curriculum. The LSQ schema that is used in the course introduction draws on the work of Kolb (Coffield et al., 2004, pp. 61-70) to propose a fourfold schema of learning styles. These are 'Activists' who learn by doing, 'Theorists' who are more interested in the theory behind actions, 'Pragmatists' who like to be able to put learning into practice and 'Reflectors' who learn by observation. If the shortcomings of the LMC are truly related to these preferences it ought now to be possible to show that one or more of them is not catered for in the course curriculum.

My journey with theological reflection has meant that Green's voice has figured prominently in this paper. His approach to theological reflection has been categorized as belonging to the praxis model of doing contextual theology (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 199; Bevans, 2002, pp. 70-87). Underlying such approaches is a Marxian epistemology that values doing as the highest form of knowing and a theology that values orthopraxis over and above orthodoxy (Bevans, 2002, p. 73-4). This, then, might be seen as the kind of methodological approach that would be favoured by the LSQ's Activists and Pragmatists.

If the LMC curriculum were to be approached with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', my own interests might lead to an investigation of whether praxis models have been favoured at the expense of approaches that would be more amenable to those who prefer to learn by exploring theory or by observation. This would lead to the hypothesis that the course has been less successful in facilitating theological reflection in some students than others because there has been too narrow a focus on the praxis model. It is certainly true that Green's pastoral cycle plays a prominent part in the open module on pastoral skills for mission and ministry but it is not the only methodological approach that is adopted here or elsewhere on the course.

For Bevans (2002, pp. 31-3) the praxis approach is one of six models of contextual theology, the others being what he calls the translation, anthropological, synthetic, countercultural and transcendental models. LMC students are introduced to five⁴ of these models on a study day

⁴ These are the five models from Bevans's original 1992 edition and exclude the countercultural model.

and invited to apply them to two case studies (see appendix 3). Graham, Walton and Ward (2005; 2007), moreover, summarize seven methods in theological reflection (including the praxis method) and these are also reflected in the curriculum. It might be assumed, for example, that LSQ 'Reflectors' (MBTI 'Introverts') would be drawn to the reflexive emphasis of what Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, pp. 18-46; 2007, pp. 49-88) call 'theology by heart'. This approach is given space on the LMC curriculum in the pastoral skills module when students are introduced to Anton Boisen, 'the living human document' and verbatim reports. The approach of 'telling God's story' or constructive narrative theology (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, pp. 78-108; 2007, pp. 151-222) is introduced during a study day on 'use and abuse of the Bible' while 'theology in the vernacular' (2005, pp. 200-229; 2007, pp. 370-438) is explored during a day focused on the church and its local context.

Given the constraints of time on the curriculum of a part-time course the LMC can be seen to be reasonably comprehensive in the way that it covers methodological approaches to theological reflection. This makes it difficult to see how the limitation in its success can be attributed to too narrow a methodological approach. It is also questionable how helpful learning styles and personality profiling are in gauging people's preferences in approaches to theological reflection. This can be seen by looking first at research into learning styles by Coffield et al. (2004) and then returning to the theme of participation in the *missio Dei*.

The Usefulness of Learning Style Instrumentation

Coffield et al. are critical of learning style theories but do not dismiss them completely, seeing their use as lying in the facilitation of metacognition in which learners become knowledgeable about their own learning (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 38). At this point MBTI is insightful. Whilst it may relate learning styles to fixed personality, its practitioners encourage people to work hard at their so-called 'shadow side' in each of the scheme's four dichotomies (Goldsmith and Wharton, 1993, pp. 37-40). This means that MBTI allows for change and development in people's learning. It is here that personality profiling and learning styles may prove to be helpful in facilitating theological reflection. As students examine and become knowledgeable about their own ways of learning it may be that it will facilitate exploration of as yet unfamiliar methodological approaches thus enabling deeper and more fruitful reflection.

Beyond that Coffield et al. are more cautious about the usefulness of learning styles. They review 71 models (thirteen in detail) grouping them into five families in a continuum according to the extent to which their developers claim that underlying styles and traits are fixed. MBTI and LSQ are seen as being on the fixed end of the scale, the former seeing learning styles as one

component in a relatively stable personality profile (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 32) and the latter seeing learning preferences as being comparatively fixed (2004, p.29).

The difficulty, according to Coffield et al., is that developers of such essentialist models do not provide enough empirical evidence to support their claims. They conclude that the whole area of learning style instrumentation is complex and conceptually confusing at theoretical, pedagogical and commercial levels (Coffield et al., 2004, pp. 1-3), that extravagant claims are made for a profusion of models and advice to practitioners in the field consists of logical deductions from the learning style theories rather than on empirical research (Coffield et al., 2004, p.43).

They further argue that the use of essentialist learning style models is likely to result in the unhelpful labelling of learners (Coffield et al., 2004 p. 56). In the case of the LMC the danger would be of labelling students as being predisposed towards a particular methodology at the expense of other approaches that could prove to be equally if not more fruitful. To the extent that MBTI and LMC are understood to be fixed or essentialist models, Coffield et al. would suggest that they should be used by the LMC with care and they would recommend approaches such as those of Entwistle, Sternberg and Vermunt in which there is a move away from fixed learning styles towards learning approaches, strategies and conceptions of learning (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 52).

Learning Styles and the Reflective God

If theological reflection is understood to involve participation in the mission of the reflective God it will further call into question the extent to which it is related to fixed or determined learning styles. God's creative and reflective activity in which Christians are called to share is, by its nature, precarious (Vanstone, 1977, p. 46) because it may result either in triumph or tragedy. LMC students and others who are called to reflect theologically may or may not make a triumphant response that leads them to participate in the loving purposes of God. To the extent that they fail to do so the situation is open to redemption. Aptitude for and approach to theological reflection, therefore, is open to change and development and to suggest that it is fixed appears to be problematic. It may also be that as LMC students join in the mission of the reflective God and their own practice issues either in triumph or tragedy they will find themselves open to new methodological approaches. The very practice of theological reflection, it could be argued, has potential to change those doing the reflecting.

This return to the theme of participation in the *missio Dei* has further underlined the conclusions drawn from my summary of the research of Coffield et al. Whilst learning styles may be

helpful in facilitating metacognition, doubt has been cast as to whether students come to the LMC with fixed preferences for particular approaches to theological reflection. The assumption that the limited success of the course is due to a failure to match students with appropriate methodologies has also been undermined. My exploration now turns, therefore, to the second of the assumptions that underlie the LMC curriculum.

Developmental Theories and Theological Reflection

This is the assumption that there is a time-related, developmental path towards effective theological reflection and that the mixed success of the LMC is attributable to people being at different stages on this journey. There is a long tradition of developmental theories reaching back to Piaget (Jarvis, 1997, pp. 55-6) and it is hard to deny their efficacy in describing development in children. Here, however, the issue at stake is their usefulness in providing insight into the development of skills in theological reflection among adults. My argument will be that, in this context, to the extent that they are understood to be *descriptive* of what can be observed among LMC students they are insightful. To the extent, however, that they are understood to *prescribe* a process through which all students *must* progress in order to develop as reflective practitioners they should be regarded as being more problematic. Although tensions between descriptive and prescriptive functions may be inherent in all developmental theories, I will develop this argument by looking at three in particular: those of Fowler, Perry and Kohlberg.

In Fowler's schema of faith development, progression to the fourth of six stages is seen as being particularly significant. This is because it involves a transition away from an unexamined worldview based around significant others and towards an independent ability to examine self and values (Fowler, 1981, pp. 173-183). In Perry's seminal work on intellectual development among college students a similarly pivotal transition takes place at the progression to the fifth of nine positions when a 'drastic revolution' occurs as dualistic right/wrong functions give way to the perception that all knowledge is contextual and relativistic (Perry, 1999, pp.121-148).

Observation of LMC students suggests that perception of the contextual and relativistic nature of knowledge that is pivotal in the schemas of Fowler and Perry is also significant in facilitating theological reflection. It is those students who see their own doctrinal standpoint as the only one from which truth can be viewed who seem to have most difficulty in connecting faith with experience. It might be, therefore, that some LMC students struggle with the concept of theological reflection because they have yet to develop self-critical skills and contextual awareness.

The developmental theories, then, have helped towards a description of what is going on among LMC students and point towards the need to develop pedagogical approaches that will facilitate self-critical and contextual awareness. There is more to these theories, however, than a straightforward step towards a critical understanding of self, knowledge and context. Fowler, Perry and Kohlberg all propose a progression of steps, stages or positions on the way to maturity of faith, intellect or morality. They argue, moreover, that these steps towards maturity are common to all human beings regardless of their tradition, culture or environment.

Form and Content in Theological Reflection

Kohlberg, for example, grounds his theory of moral development in Socratic and Platonic philosophy. He argues, against a position of relativism, that all concepts of the good and moral virtue are ultimately one and that the name of this ideal is 'justice'. From this position he goes on to argue that there is a six fold 'universal invariant sequence of moral development' that is common to all human beings irrespective of 'climate or culture' (Kohlberg, 1981, 23-30). This presents the possibility that there may be a similar 'universal invariant sequence' of development in theological reflection; the *form* taken in such development, so the argument might run, is unaffected by the *content* of doctrine or the traditions of faith. Similarly, Fowler (1981, pp. 9-15) argues that the form of faith development is the same regardless of the content of religious tradition or belief (Le Cornu, 200, 436).

Experience on the LMC suggests, however, that the development of skills in theological reflection is far more closely related to the content of faith than these developmental theorists would suggest. As their follow-up task after the second study day of the core foundational module LMC students are asked to write a reflective account of their journey of faith and these reflective accounts show a rich variety in students' experience. This could be argued to militate against there being a universal invariant in faith development. In the introduction to this paper I defined theological reflection in terms of the correlation of resources from the Christian tradition with experience in a way that draws out implications for everyday living. The resources of the tradition – that is, the content of faith – shape the very process itself. This makes it difficult to see how there can be an invariable developmental path towards effective theological reflection that is not is not related to the content of faith.

The way in which form is related to content in theological reflection can be helpfully explored by a discussion of the way Walton (2009, pp. 111-118) uses the alternative phrase 'faithful reflection'. The term suggests an activity that is done by people who are 'full of faith'. It implies that this involves being faithful to the resources of faith. As Kinast puts it (2000, p. 3) faithful reflection is rooted in the 'symbols, narratives, rituals, doctrines and theories of

tradition'. This places it in continuity with what has gone before it but not in a way that relates it to a static tradition. Rather, theological reflection correlates experience with tradition in a way that serves praxis so that it is 'characterized by its ability to generate new forms through which the reality of that tradition may come through more fully and richly' (Kinast, 2000, p. 4). I set out earlier a theological standpoint that sees those same 'symbols, narratives, rituals, doctrines and theories of tradition' as works of the Holy Spirit that facilitate theological reflection that involves participation in the *missio Dei*. Such a standpoint suggests that reflective practice is intertwined with the resources of faith. There is interrelatedness, therefore, between form and content in theological reflection.

This leads me to suggest that the way LMC students have been nurtured in the traditions of faith, rather than the position they are at on a ubiquitous developmental path, is of crucial significance for their skills in theological reflection. Where such nurturing has given them permission to correlate the tradition with experience in a way that enriches tradition and practice, theological reflection comes easily. Where, by contrast, their nurturing has led them to internalize a static, restrictive understanding of scripture and tradition, it is more problematic. In the remainder of my paper, therefore, I will turn my attention to the way in which Christian nurturing might serve either to hinder or facilitate theological reflection. Here the concept of voice will come to the fore as I explore how the external dimensions of faith such as the voices of clergy, scripture or doctrine (Le Cornu, 2005a, and p.427) may have the potential either to silence or give voice to theological reflection.

The Metaphor of Voice

A possible reason for the developmental theorists' assertion that their schemas are universally applicable is the monochrome nature of the context in which their research was done. For Perry (1999, pp. 17-19) this was confined to white, middleclass, male undergraduates at Harvard (Belenky et al., 1996, 17-19). A later development of his work by Belenky et al. set out to rectify this imbalance by focussing on the experiences of women whilst looking at a broader social range (Belenky et al., 1996, pp. 11- 14). The research resulted in a schema of 'women's ways of knowing' and employed the metaphor of voice to describe their developing sense of self and intellect (1996, pp. 16-20).

It is significant that this metaphor is rooted in speaking and listening rather than seeing. The latter suggests 'standing at a distance to get a proper view' while the former points towards 'dialogue and interaction' (Belenky et al., 1996, p.18). Visual metaphors have been favoured in Western intellectual thought and connote a dispassionate 'removal from the particular' (1996, p. 19). So Belenky et al. prefer to speak of the way in which the language of voice and silence can

be used to describe what women learn from their everyday experience to form their understanding of the world and their place in it.

Le Cornu has built on the work of Belenky et al. to carry out research into the way the external dimensions of faith such as the voices of clergy, scripture or tradition become internalized by adult believers. She suggests a process of progressive internalization that results in 'discreet and identifiable knowledge' being absorbed so that it becomes tacit and indistinguishable from the self. Theological reflection, she argues, facilitates externalization of this tacitly held knowledge so that it results in existential change that gives voice to the self (Le Cornu, 2009, pp. 285-291). This might be seen as a description of the process by which adults come to participate in the mission of the reflective God. To that extent it might be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit that, to return to Vanstone's language, has resulted in 'triumph'.

The external and authoritative dimensions of faith, however, equally have the potential to result in 'tragedy' by impairing the reflective process. This leads Le Cornu to propose her own fourfold typology in which a sample of Christian adults is categorized between 'Discreet', 'Related', 'Assimilative' and 'Interpretive' believers (2005a, pp. 432-436). It is a typology that I will juxtapose with Belenky et al.'s schema to explore how the image of voice can be used to describe how interaction with external voices from the tradition serves either to silence or give voice to theological reflection.

Ways of Knowing and Ways of Believing

Belenky et al. begin with the position of 'Silence' at which women are 'selfless and voiceless and external authorities know the truth and are all powerful' (Belenky et al., 1996, p.134). The same external voices, particularly those of patriarchy, continue to carry sway at their next position of 'Received' knowing and shape women's sense of self and understanding of the world. For adult believers Le Cornu suggests that clergy, church leaders, scripture or doctrine have the potential to become similarly powerful external authorities. Where this happens, adults may see the correlation of the authoritative voices of faith with experience as being tantamount to falling into the 'sin of doubt' (Le Cornu, 2005a, p. 42). The result is that they cannot connect faith and experience and so hold them in two different dimensions of their lives. This Le Cornu describes as 'Discreet' believing. It may be that the authoritative voices of tradition prevent some LMC students from externalizing their tacitly held beliefs in ways that connect faith with experience.

For 'Interpretive' believers, suggests Le Cornu, a different form of authoritative voice serves to silence their ability to critique. For Christians in this category the interpretation of experience

constructs an 'all-encompassing authoritative faith framework' (Le Cornu, 2005a, p. 434). Receptive rather than critical, such believers fear that their capacity to critique may prevent them from hearing God's voice (Le Cornu, 2005a, p. 442). Identifiable among LMC students from a Charismatic tradition, 'interpretive' believers' fear that God's voice might be obscured makes it difficult for them to engage in a critical exploration of experience that might challenge or renew their authoritative faith network.

At Belenky et al.'s third position of 'subjective' knowing, women begin to make space for growth of the self by rejecting external voices in favour of their own private authority. At the fourth position of 'procedural knowledge' they are understood to identify with external definitions or roles as they develop a public voice that speaks the language of male dominated power groups. In neither position, however, have they managed to integrate their own unique voice with the voices of others.

For Le Cornu, adults who have begun to develop their own reflective voice are described as 'Related' believers who construct their faith and worldview in a way that 'integrates and often originates from experience'. It might be supposed that this is a more promising position from which to reflect theologically and that it should be understood as a progression from the other stages. It is moot point whether Belenky et al.'s programme should be regarded as being developmental or progressive but is difficult to see how their final position of 'Integrated' knowing can be seen as anything other than preferable to the position of 'Silence' (Stanton, 1996, pp. 39-40). Similarly, Le Cornu's typology may not be intended to be developmental but it is hard to see 'Related' believing as being anything other than a progression from, for example, 'Discreet' believing.

Killen and De Beer (1994, pp. 4-16), however, suggest that theological reflection is as likely to be disabled by what they label 'self-assurance' – that is, an over-dependence on experience – as it is by their category of 'certitude' – that is, an over-dependence on the framework of faith. The danger for 'Related' believers is that the external voice of experience becomes its own authority that silences the voice of the faith tradition and hinders the development of a theologically reflective self.

It is only at the final position of 'Integrated' knowledge that Belenky et al. (1996, p.134) see women as developing their 'own unique and authentic voice'. Here there is integration of intuitive knowledge with knowledge learnt from others. In Le Cornu's schema there is not an equivalent category of 'Integrated' believing. Her fourth position is 'Assimilated' believing. The context here is Roman Catholic and monastic and it arises primarily out of interviews

carried out with French Benedictine nuns. Such believers see the self as being sinful and in need of transformation and there is a diminution of the self as they assimilate the voices of ‘saintly predecessors’ (Le Cornu 2005, 438). In my second paper I will explore whether such assimilation can be seen to result in a flourishing of the self that could be understood as participation in the mission of the reflective God.

I will also seek to establish whether it is possible to identify a position of ‘Integrated’ believing among those LMC students who seem able to integrate their own tacitly held beliefs with insights from the tradition and experience in ways that have implications for daily living. As my research unfolds this will lead me to explore whether pedagogical and methodological approaches can be identified that might facilitate such ‘Integrated’ believing.

Conclusion

The concept of voice provides a helpful image for exploring theological reflection that is understood as participation in the *missio Dei*. Listening and speaking convey an interactive paying of attention not dissimilar from the painstaking attention that I have suggested God pays to creation. Le Cornu’s theory of progressive internalization provides insight into how the external authoritative voices of faith – that is its content – come to be absorbed into the self. The form of theological reflection can be seen to be provided by the externalization of these absorbed voices. This provides an interplay between form and content that I have suggested may be absent from developmental theories.

Le Cornu’s fourfold theory moves towards establishing positions of believing that might be occupied by LMC students that have potential either to help or hinder the process of theological reflection. Although the extent to which the schema has identified all the possible positions of believing that could possibly be occupied by adult believers is an issue that I will carry forward into my on-going research, this puts me in a position to identify a working hypothesis. If it is to be more successful in facilitating theological reflection the LMC will need to find ways to help students who occupy a variety of positions to externalize their tacitly held beliefs so that they can be correlated with experience.

Whilst identification of learning styles may help towards metacognition that will facilitate this process and developmental theories may prove to be aids to reflection on the journey of faith, enabling LMC students to give voice to their deeply held beliefs may hold the key to their participation in the mission of the reflective God.

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Appendix 1.1 – The Core Foundational Module

The following is an extract from the LMC syllabus covering the core foundational module. It is provided by way of background to the context for my work. My intention is that, subject to university ethics approval, the reflective tasks will form the data for my proposed future research.

Everyone training to be a licensed lay minister will do the core foundational module (CFM), regardless of their prior learning. This element will not be open to others, so participants will journey with the one group throughout two years of training. The CFM will consist of six days and two weekends spread over the two years. A reflective task will be given to be done following each of these. These are commented on, but not graded.

OVERALL AIM: to help participants develop the reflective skills, spirituality, character and personal qualities that will equip them for public ministry, particularly through the experience of sharing in a diverse learning community.

KEY LEARNING METHOD: Facilitated interaction in the whole group responding to a variety of stimuli which will include short lectures alongside drama, story, visual images, case studies, poetry etc..

Day 1: Starting the Journey

Overall aim: introduce the course as a whole and begin to form the learning community.

Content will include introductions, expectations, course practicalities and learning styles.

Day 2 – God’s Passion and our Response

Overall aim: to explore how participants’ might provide a model and focus for the *missio dei* through the ongoing story of their life of faith.

Content will include God’s loving purposes for the world, the nature of true love, faith journeys in Scripture, students’ own faith journeys.

Weekend A – Prayer and Spirituality

Overall Aim: for participants to deepen their understanding and experience of prayer, together with a variety of ways of worship and different streams of spirituality, to equip them further in their ministry to provide a model and focus for God’s mission in the world.

Content will include different traditions of prayer and spirituality, reflection on personal spirituality, the role and value of spiritual companions, listening to God and a variety of styles of worship through the weekend including ‘café church’.

Day 3 – Use and Abuse of God’s Word

Overall aim: for participants to explore how they might provide a focus for the *missio dei* through a richer understanding of the interpretation of God’s word in scripture.

Content will include the canon of Scripture; the authority of Scripture; the relationship of the Old Testament to the New; different approaches to understanding the Bible with evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each; the particular role of the Bible in different ministries.

Day 4 – Integrated Personalities: Understanding Self and Others

Overall aim: for participants to be introduced to Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and to explore its relevance for ministerial practice.

Content will include introduction to the theory of Myers-Briggs; helping people identify their ‘best fit’ type (course members will be asked to fill in a questionnaire in advance); implication of the Myers-Briggs applied to the three different ministries

Weekend B – Becoming Integrated Ministers

Overall Aim: for participants to reflect on the importance of teamwork as they minister within the structures of the Church of England.

Content will include bible study on 1 Corinthians; teaching about teamwork; working as a member of a team with reflection on the experience; consideration of the structures of the Church of England; how we respond to authority.

Day 5 – Becoming Ministers in Context

Overall aim: to enable participants to relate their specific ministry to the changing context for mission and evangelism.

Content will include teaching about a variety of models of contextual theology; consideration of a case study; group work followed by presentations of conclusions; work on understanding the specific contexts in which course members will minister.

Day 6 – Becoming Public Ministers

Overall aim: for participants to explore the ways that licensed ministers provide a model and a focus for the Church’s expression of the *missio dei* and examine the particular challenges and opportunities involved in public ministry.

Content will include teaching about leadership drawing on biblical and secular models; working collaboratively; maintaining boundaries; prayerful preparation for taking on the role of a licensed lay minister.

Appendix 1.2 – The *Living Faith* modules

This is an extract from the publicity material given to people who are enquiring about licensed lay ministry in the diocese. It provides further background about the content of the LMC. Lay pastoral ministers and licensed evangelists have to do six of these modules over two years while readers have to do nine over three years. They are taught at two different centres (Northampton and Corby) and are open to people who are not studying on the LMC.

OM1 - Introduction to the Bible and Study Skills

This module will cover the content of the Bible as a whole, including the different types of writing, the particular role of the Old and New Testaments, and a variety of ways of “reading” the Bible. It will introduce the method of reflective practice. Insights into how to study Bible texts will be gained as one Old Testament book and one New Testament book are examined.

OM2 - Reading the New Testament

You will explore the background to the New Testament and its theology through examining particular texts. This module will help you to understand these texts in their historical, sociological and literary context and relate them to our world today.

OM3 - Reading the Old Testament

You will explore the background to the Old Testament and its theology through examining particular texts. This module will help you to understand these texts in their historical, sociological and literary context and relate them to our context today. The importance of understanding the Old Testament in reading the New Testament will be examined.

OM4 - Introduction to Church History

This module will introduce the main periods, developments and issues in the Church through history. It will look in particular at the development of the early Church and the Church in the West. It will also consider the development of the Church world wide.

OM5 - Pastoral Skills for Ministry and Mission

You will explore how pastoral care is part of ministry and mission. This module will help you to develop practical skills in pastoral care and the ability to reflect on pastoral situations. It will focus on pastoral issues in times of transition and change and examine the boundaries necessary

for effective pastoral care.

OM6 - The Christian God

This module will introduce Christian doctrine by examining the doctrine of God and the Trinity. It will examine the Biblical roots and emerging doctrine of God and the person of Christ with particular reference to how the Creeds developed.

OM7 - Ethics – Responding to Moral Issues

This module will give a framework for examining ethical issues and help you to understand a variety of Christian approaches. It will look at the role of Scripture and the role of God in relation to moral issues we face today, and examine issues around birth, mid life and dying. You will be invited to use your own context as a basis for reflection.

OM8 - The Mission of God

You will examine God's mission Biblically and through history. This module will consider worldwide Church growth and developments. It will help you to explore your part in God's mission. It will consider the particular challenges to mission faced by the Church in Britain in the 21st century.

OM9 - Worship and the Sacraments

You will examine the key role of worship and the sacraments in the life of the Church through exploring their Biblical and historical roots. This module will examine the Biblical basis of worship and the sacraments. It will look at the development of Eucharistic worship, and non sacramental worship with particular attention to the importance of liturgy.

OM10 - Core skills for Children's work

You will explore specific skills for children's ministry. This module will help you to develop your understanding of children and the skills required to nurture children in their journey of faith. It will help to develop a vision of a Christian community in which children's faith is expressed and valued.

OM11 - Working with Adults

You will explore specific skills for working with adults in groups. This module will cover areas like how adults learn, understanding group dynamics, effective group leadership and facilitation skills. It will be useful to those working with a variety of groups such as Lent groups, Christian basics courses, pastoral visiting team, bereavement groups, confirmation groups, enquirers groups.

Appendix 1.3 - Faithful Ministry in Context

This is an extract from the course leaders' notes on the fifth core foundational model study day during which students are introduced to the models of contextual theology proposed by Stephen Bevans. The names for each of the models have been changed in an effort to make them more accessible to students studying at the level of the LMC. The course leaders introduce the models against the backdrop of a case study of a school governing body that has to write an anti-bullying policy. The students are then invited, in groups, to apply the models to a further case study on transgender issues. The exercise has proved a lively and effective way of encouraging students to engage in a variety of approaches to theological reflection.

Some Terminology

- We have said a great deal about becoming *reflective practitioners*
- Roger Walton uses the phrase 'faithful reflection' instead of 'theological reflection'
- The word 'faithful' may prove to be helpful in what we're talking about today because
 1. 'Faithful' suggests an activity that is done by people who are 'full of faith'
 2. 'Faithful' suggests an activity that is faithful to scripture and tradition
 3. 'Faithful' suggests an activity that it is in continuity with the reflections about God and his world that have taken place in the past.
 4. 'Faithful' suggests my endeavour to be true to the God who has called me and to the church within or out of which that call came.
- So being *faithful ministers* might be another way of saying that we are *reflective practitioners*

Today we will look at how we might go about being faithful ministers in context. We will start by looking at five different approaches to being faithful ministers in context and applying them to the task of writing a school anti-bullying policy.

Some Important Notes:

- None of these approaches is right or wrong
- Some people will have a preference for one approach or the other
But
- The approaches overlap each other
- Different approaches or combinations of approaches may be more helpful in different contexts

1. Going with the Gospel

- This approach begins with the Bible or Christian tradition
- It makes the assumption that there is one, unchanging gospel message for all people and for all time
- And so being faithful ministers is simply about ‘translating’ the core Christian message to your context
- Cultural relevance is seen as important but only in order to get the timeless message of the gospel across
- Revelation comes through scripture and/or tradition
- Christian identity is seen as being more important than cultural identity (I am a Christian first and English second)

Strengths of the ‘Going with the Gospel’ approach

- It is faithful to the gospel message and takes its translation to the contemporary context seriously
- It recognizes the transient, fickle, changing nature of human culture

Weaknesses of the ‘Going with the Gospel’ Approach

- It assumes that all cultures and contexts have the same needs
- It assumes that there is a core Christian message that is relevant to every culture – but what is that core message?
- It doesn’t do justice to the fact the gospel itself comes to us through human culture

How would adherents of this approach go about writing a school anti-bullying policy?

They would begin by searching the Bible to find what it has to say about bullying. The story of David and Goliath (1 Sam 17), for example, might provide scope for some reflection, especially if this were to be looked at alongside David’s shameful later treatment of Uriah the Hittite and Nathan’s heroic stand against the powerful bully (2 Sam 11-12). Jesus’ commandment to love God and neighbour might be used as the foundation for the policy. It would simply be a matter, then, of ‘translating’ the insights into an affective, culturally relevant policy.

2. Discerning God’s Presence

- The opposite end of the scale from the ‘going with the Gospel’ approach
- Revelation is seen as coming through human culture

- The biblical starting point for this approach is that human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27)
- Faithful ministry therefore starts with culture and seeks to discover how it reflects God's image
- And so faithful ministry involves drawing on insights from the social sciences (e.g. sociology and psychology)
- There is room for a Christian critique of culture, but the Gospel is seen as being important largely insofar as it resonates with contemporary culture
- Cultural identity is more important than Christian identity (I am English first and a Christian second)

Strengths of the 'Discerning God's Presence' Approach

- It takes human culture seriously stressing the God-given character of the world into which God sent his only Son (John 3.16)
- It allows people to see the Christian Faith in a new light
- It starts where people are

Weaknesses of the 'Discerning God's Presence' Approach

- It has a romanticized view of culture
- It doesn't enter into a thorough enough critique of culture

How would adherents of this approach go about writing a school anti-bullying policy?

They would take seriously the insights offered by educational psychologists, sociologists and other experts into the causes of bullying in schools. They might also see the positive attitudes of teachers and children in the school as being signs of God's presence out of which a policy could be formulated.

3. Carrying on a Conversation

- This is a middle-of-the-road approach
- It involves a dialogue between scripture and tradition on the one hand and the complexities of the cultural context on the other
- It assumes that different cultures and worldviews can borrow and learn from each other
- Faithful ministry therefore seeks a synthesis between gospel and culture
- It values both Christian and cultural identity (I am both English *and* a Christian)

Strengths of the 'Carrying on a Conversation' Approach

- Openness and conversation between cultures bears witness to the universality of the gospel
- It takes both gospel and culture seriously

Weaknesses of the 'Carrying on a Conversation' Approach

- There is a danger of the gospel 'selling out' to the culture
- It may end up too weak and 'wishy-washy'

How would adherents of this approach go about writing a school anti-bullying policy?

They would bring insights from the social sciences, the positive attitudes of the teachers/children and insights from scripture and tradition into dialogue. They would look for a higher synthesis between these conversation partners. The command to love God and neighbour might be seen to be given some content by the insights from the social sciences and to be enacted in the positive roles played out by teachers and children. This synthesis would then form the basis for the anti-bullying policy.

4. Looking for Liberation

- The biblical starting point is the Exodus
- Faithful ministry involves identifying the issues and structures in a given context that undermine or enslave people
- Reflective action or *praxis* involves helping people to be freed from these undermining structures
- So this approach involves political action and social change
- It assumes that the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing – 'right-acting' is more important than 'right-thinking'

Strengths of the 'Looking for Liberation' Approach

- It takes present realities and future possibilities seriously
- It is committed to liberating action

Weaknesses of the 'Looking for Liberation' Approach

- Scripture and the Christian tradition often seem to be subordinated to political theory.
- Isn't there more to the Gospel than political/social change?

How would adherents of this approach go about writing a school anti-bullying policy?

They would ask questions about the social, political and economic structures that give rise to bullying. Issues around gender, sexuality, social class and ethnicity would be seen as important. The aim of the anti-bullying policy would be to free children from the need to bully others that arises from these structures and issues. This might extend political action on the part of governors, teachers and parents.

5. Being Ourselves

- The starting point is human experience
- The things that form us as Christians – prayer, worship, reading the scriptures, receiving spiritual direction – are crucial for this approach
- So are the social, cultural and psychological factors that form me and others
- It asks: how can I be true to myself and how can we be true to ourselves (the technical term is ‘authentic’) as Christian people living in this context?
- It sees revelation as coming through human experience

Strengths of the ‘Being Ourselves’ Approach

- It seeks insight and understanding rather than certitude
- It enables faithful practitioners to ground their experience of God’s love in the context in which they find themselves

Weaknesses of the ‘Being Ourselves’ Approach

- Who defines what is ‘authentic’ in a particular situation?
- Is it really very different from the ‘Carrying on a Conversation’ approach? So the same criticisms may apply
- It can be quite a hard concept to grasp!

How would adherents of this approach go about writing a school anti-bullying policy?

They would begin with their own experiences of either bullying or being bullied and reflect on these experiences in the light of their Christian journeys. This might lead to conversations with other governors, teachers and children about their experiences. Based on these reflections an anti-bullying policy that would be ‘authentic’ to the school community might be written.

Models of Contextual Theology

The five approaches outlined above are based on five ‘models’ for doing theology in context that are described by Stephen Bevans. These models are

- The Translation Model (Going with the Gospel)
- The Anthropological Model (Discerning God’s Presence)
- The Synthetic Model (Carrying on a Conversation)
- The Praxis Model (Looking for Liberation)
- The Transcendental Model (Being Ourselves)

Appendix 2 –Professional Doctorate Paper 2

Anglia Ruskin University

**An Investigation into Theological Reflection among Licensed Lay Ministry
Students**

Quentin Chandler

SID: 0214247

**A paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for
the degree of Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology**

Submitted 26th June 2012

Contents

	Page No
Abstract.....	176
Introduction.....	177
 <u>Part 1: Revised Approaches to Research</u>	
1. A Shift in Epistemological Framework.....	178
a. Nomothetic Knowing.....	179
b. Ideographic Knowing.....	179
2. Identifying a Method.....	180
a. Hermeneutical Phenomenology.....	180
b. Phenomenology: Bracketing Preconception.....	180
c. Hermeneutics: Getting a Purchase on Lived Experience.....	181
d. Hermeneutics and Power.....	181
3. Hermeneutics and Being.....	182
4. A Revised Research Question.....	183
 <u>Part 2: The Pilot Study</u>	
1. Arrangements for the Focus Group.....	183
2. Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Focus Group.....	184
3. Summary of Focus Group Transcripts.....	185
a. Charlotte's Story.....	185
b. Amanda's Story.....	186
c. Diane's Story.....	188
d. Leanne's Story.....	189
 Conclusion.....	 190
Bibliography.....	192

Abstract

This paper is part of my research project into theological reflection among students on the Lay Ministry Course (LMC), the Anglican Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for licensed lay ministry. It is presented in two parts. The first sets out how a shift in my approach to knowledge led me to change my research method and revise my central question. I chart how, from seeking a generic explanation for perceived variations in aptitude for theological reflection, I changed direction to focus on the particular stories the students themselves have to tell about their experience of theological reflection on the programme. In the second part of the paper I summarize the results of a pilot study that was put in place to determine how helpful the changed approach to method and knowledge might be to my on-going research. This was done by drawing together a focus group made up of a sample of LMC students who were asked to describe how they had reflected theologically in a pastoral situation or encounter. The results are shown, tentatively, to suggest that a majority of the students had struggled to correlate insights from the Christian tradition with the underlying components of the situations they described. The possibility that these difficulties might be alleviated if the students were to be introduced to a greater variety of methods of theological reflection is identified as a possible area for research. The paper concludes that the continued use of methods that seek to describe and interpret what LMC students have to say about the ways in which they reflect theologically is likely to prove a fruitful approach to my research.

The length of the paper is 6,995 words.

Introduction

The Lay Ministry Course (LMC) is the Anglican Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for licensed lay ministry. Its students may be seen to occupy an interesting hinterland that is ripe for a research project in the field of practical theology. Jeff Astley has suggested that adults who do theology do so from one of two positions. First, 'ordinary theologians' are those people who engage in 'God talk' but who have 'received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind'; and, second, 'academic theologians' are those whose reflections and conversations about God have been informed by the context of the academy (Astley, 2002, pp. 56-7). LMC students, as they progress through the programme, take their first steps away from the first and towards the second group. It is the way that this movement affects students' practice of faith that is likely to prove a fertile area for practical theological research. My role as principal of the LMC has given me an interest in carrying out such a project.

As I embarked on the work, my informal observations suggested that an exploration of the way students relate to the concept of theological reflection would be an appropriate starting point. Theological reflection is central to the training programme and yet I found myself puzzling why it might be that some students seemed to relate to the concept far more readily than others. This led to the formulation of the following research question:

Why is it that some LMC students seem to have greater aptitude for theological reflection than others?

Initial attempts to answer this question proved to be heavy-going. The first issue to arise, that of defining precisely what is meant by theological reflection, was resolved with reasonable ease by drawing on a definition offered by Robert Kinast (2000, p. 1) to suggest that it entails the correlation of lived experience with insights from scripture and the Christian tradition in ways that draw out implications for Christian living (Chandler, 2011, p. 1). When it came to exploring why some LMC students seemed to be better than others at doing this, however, it became far more difficult to make headway.

It was a comment from a colleague that provided a clue as to the way forward. She expressed some puzzlement about the research question because her own observations of the LMC programme had led her to conclude that it had been notably successful at facilitating theological reflection. This caused a re-examination of some of my basic assumptions. The way I had framed the question suggested that there was a problem with the LMC; namely that some of its students had difficulty in reflecting theologically. This, however, was merely my own

perception of the situation; my colleague saw things rather differently. Her understanding was that the programme had been successful in helping most if not all of its students to correlate what they had learned about scripture and the tradition with lived experience in ways that were likely to strengthen their ministerial practice. The difference of opinion led me to suspect that I might be missing something; were more of the students engaging in effective theological reflection than I had hitherto assumed or been able to recognize? The conclusion drawn was that I needed to pay closer attention to the students on the LMC and how they relate to theological reflection both as a concept and a practice in order to draw some conclusions about the effect it might have on their ministerial formation.

In this paper I will chart how I have set out to listen more closely to the stories of the students. In the first part I will give an account of how the need to provide a more rigorous description of the ways in which the students reflect theologically led to some changes in the way I approached my research. These involved a shift in epistemological framework, the identification of appropriate research methods and the reframing of my central question. This will pave the way in the second part of the paper for me to begin a description of how LMC students correlate the insights of the faith tradition with lived experience and the ways in which the programme might have strengthened their reflective practice. This will be done by summarizing data drawn from a pilot study conducted with a focus group made up of a sample of LMC students. Particular attention will be paid to the way the participants related to an LMC module on pastoral care that emerged from the discussion as being significant to the way they do theological reflection. Drawing on the data, I will suggest that introduction to a greater variety of methods in theological reflection is likely to strengthen the students' ministerial praxis. I will conclude that further description and exploration of such theological reflection will prove a fruitful avenue for my on-going research.

Part 1 – Revised Approaches to Research

1. A Shift in Epistemological Framework

The new direction of my research led me away from a search for a generic explanation for perceived variance in aptitude for theological reflection that would be applicable to other contexts and towards an exploration of the unique, non-replicable, lived experience of LMC students. This shift was away from what John Swinton and Harriet Mowat (2006, pp. 126-7) call a nomothetic understanding of knowledge and towards an ideographic epistemology (Schilderman, 2012, pp. 126-7).

(a) Nomothetic Knowing

Nomothetic epistemology adopts positivist assumptions and is characteristic of the natural sciences. It may also be appropriate to practical theology when quantitative research methods are employed to draw on empirical data such as statistical information or scholarly surveys to provide knowledge about the practices of faith (Schilderman, 2012; Astley, 2002, pp. 98-100). Exponents of nomothetic knowing begin with a hypothesis and test it by empirical observation so that it can be shown to resist attempts at falsification. This leads to generic knowledge that is replicable in and applicable to other situations or populations.

The problem-based implication behind my original research question led me unwittingly to adopt this epistemological framework as I set out to hypothesize why some people might struggle with theological reflection. The intention was to test any resulting hypothesis by observation of LMC students and then formulate a theory of aptitude for theological reflection that would be replicable among other populations. Several possibilities were explored (Chandler, 2011). I considered the extent to which difficulty in correlating faith insights and lived experience might be attributable to people's personality types or learning styles (Coffield, et al., 2004); whether it might be due to their positions on a progressive developmental path (Fowler, 1981); and the influence authoritative frameworks of faith might have on adults' learning and reflecting (Le Cornu, 2005) .

Any or all of these approaches might very well prove to be useful tools for describing how LMC students reflect (Chandler, 2011, p. 15) but I was seeking to go further and deduce from them a prescriptive explanation as to why some people have difficulty with theological reflection. The flaw was that, thus far, I had only been dealing with my own perceptions of what was going on with the students without making any attempt to test its validity. I was trying to find a generalizable theory for a problem the existence of which was unproven. There was a need, then, to take a step backwards and pay closer attention to the practices of the LMC. The decision was made to explore whether a better starting point might be an inductive approach that would pay attention to the particular stories that LMC students have to tell about their experiences of theological reflection and the training programme.

(b) Idiographic Knowing

The exploration of this revised starting point necessitated a shift in epistemological framework in the direction of ideographic knowing. This is an epistemology that undergirds qualitative rather than quantitative research (Astley, 2002, pp. 98-100). In contrast to a nomothetic search for knowledge that is applicable to any and all situations, it sees truth as being located in 'unique, non-replicable experiences' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 43); in this case in the lived

experience of theological reflection among LMC students. This gives it particular resonance with the Christian tradition in which truth is ultimately seen as being revealed in the ‘unique, non-replicable’ event of the incarnate Christ. Instead of seeing any findings that might emerge from the research as being generalizable and replicable elsewhere, an ideographic approach would see their usefulness as being restricted to providing insightful resonances with theological reflection in other contexts.

Ideographic epistemology exists within the interpretative paradigm of constructivism. That is, it assumes that all knowledge is, at least to an extent, constructed by individuals and communities (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 34-6). This leads its adherents to adopt research methods that would seek to establish how students on the LMC construct their understanding of theological reflection by adopting a rigorous approach to narrative that pays careful attention to the stories told by the students themselves (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 38). The purpose would be to provide a thick description (Thompson, et al., 2008, p. 53) that would do justice both to the uniqueness and the complexity of the way LMC students correlate insights from the faith tradition with lived experience.

2. Identifying a Method

(a) Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Having decided to explore the usefulness of ideographic epistemology for the research project, I identified ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ as a potential method (Astley, 2002, pp. 110-114; Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 110-116). As its name suggests, this method promised to lead in the direction of a thick description of theological reflection among LMC students by paying attention to both phenomenology and hermeneutics. At the phenomenological level it promised to help me pay attention to the phenomenon itself, that is the lived experience of the LMC students, in as objective and bias-free way as possible. At the same time, at its hermeneutical level, it promised to help me explore the part my pre-understandings had to play in my interpretation of what the students had to say. I will now look in more detail at how these two levels promised to facilitate my research.

(b) Phenomenology: Bracketing Preconceptions

In encouraging an unbiased, objective enquiry into the phenomenon being observed the method follows the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 235-242). This encourages the suspension or ‘bracketing’ of any expectations that the researcher might have about the outcome of a project. Such bracketing would allow the lived experience of the LMC students to be heard in a way that was not unduly influenced by my own preconceptions. This

is not to say that bracketing is easily practised. Indeed, I recognized from the outset that it was likely to prove difficult in relation to my research project given my close interest in the LMC.

I have been involved with the programme from its conception, first as director of studies and latterly as principal. I know the syllabus and the students well and this led me to have some expectations as to what my work with the focus group might reveal; I strongly suspected, for example, that it would show that the programme had given students linguistic tools to talk about the ways they correlate faith with experience. I clearly had a vested interest in being able to report that the course had been successful in providing such tools and there was a danger that this might skew my findings. It may, indeed, have been in a subconscious attempt to compensate for such bias that I had originally assumed there was something problematic about the way the students correlate faith and experience. To the extent that they might have compromised my objective, unbiased description, these vested interests, along with my expectations, needed to be bracketed.

c) Hermeneutics: Getting a Purchase on Lived Experience

This is not to say that the researcher's prejudices and pre-understandings have no contribution to make. At the hermeneutic level, the method I chose follows in the tradition of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). According to this approach, far from being an impediment to understanding, the researcher's prejudices and pre-understandings are seen positively as prerequisites that are necessary to get a 'purchase' (Brown, 2012, p. 114; Gadamer, 2004, pp. 271-3) on the phenomenon being explored.

Gadamer understands human beings as occupying a 'horizon' of which their prejudices and pre-understandings form an integral part (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 301-5). Similarly, he sees any phenomenon we seek to understand as occupying its own horizon. The event of understanding occurs when the human subject enters into a conversation-like openness to the phenomenon so that a new entity or 'fusion of horizons' occurs (Brown, 2012, pp. 114-115). Following this method, I decided that the aim of my pilot study would be to approach the experience of LMC students with an awareness of my own prejudices and preconceptions, but with a conversation-like openness so that a 'fusion of horizons' might take place leading to a fuller understanding of the ways in which LMC students reflect.

d) Hermeneutics and Power

Whilst hermeneutic phenomenology promised to be helpful to my research project by providing a bias-free, objective description at the same time as facilitating an interpretative fusion of my own horizon with that of students on the LMC programme, it is not beyond criticism.

Habermas, for example, criticizes Gadamer's approach for being too uncritical in its dialectical openness towards the other. Similarly feminist and liberationist approaches have criticized it for failing to do justice to gender and politico-economic imbalances respectively (Brown, 2012, p. 115). But Gadamer's fusion of horizons does allow for a critical stance to be taken towards the 'economic and hegemonic interests' that lie behind social and linguistic conventions (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 550-1; Astley, 2002, p. 152). With my project, just such a critical stance needed to be taken with regard to the ways in which the dynamics of power between the researcher and the students might influence the outcome of the focus group.

There was no escaping the reality that my role involves making a final recommendation to the bishop on completion of the programme as to whether or not individual students should be licensed. This threatened to undermine my research because of the possibility that students would be reluctant to share stories or make comments for fear that these might prejudice their progress on the programme. It was for this reason that I chose a focus group rather than individual interviews to gather data for the pilot study; whilst I recognized that there was a danger that the more public setting of a focus group might have led to a reticence on the part of some participants to share openly, I decided that, on balance, strength in numbers and the mutual support of the group would be more likely to provide an environment in which they would be truthful. In the information supplied to the participants (see appendix) and in my preamble to the meeting of the focus group I was as clear as I could be that contributions would not affect anybody's progress on the LMC. I recognized, however, that my interpretation of the data would need to take account of the fact that the power dynamics would continue to play a part in the hermeneutical horizons of both researcher and participants.

3. Hermeneutics and Being

My proposed use of hermeneutic phenomenology was open to the further criticism that I was regarding it as a research *method* rather than a *methodology*. Whereas these two terms are often used interchangeably by pastoral theologians (Miller-McLemore, 2012, p. 12; Graham, 2012, pp. 201-2; Parker, 2012, pp. 207-8), a distinction can be drawn between them. Research *methods* are techniques and tests that are designed to gather and analyse data. *Methodology* refers to an overarching approach to carrying out research that comes with its own ontological, philosophical and epistemological assumptions (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 74-5). To the extent that hermeneutic phenomenology involves the specific techniques of bracketing pre-understandings and fusing interpretive horizons, it may be categorized as a research *method*. Swinton and Mowat (2006, p. 105), however, recognize that it also provides an ontological and epistemological framework and could, therefore, equally be seen as a methodology.

Indeed, Gadamer, following Martin Heidegger, saw hermeneutics not as a method or set of tools but as the fundamental nature of human-being-in-the-world (Gadamer, 2004, p. 250). To be human, according to Gadamer, is to make meaning. I decided, therefore, to approach my research in a way that sees hermeneutics not only as a research method but also as a methodology with an accompanying theory of understanding (Brown, 2012, p. 112). This led me to regard all LMC students as interpreters of situations. Given that, to a greater or lesser extent, they all have lengthy experience of Christian living, it also seemed reasonable to assume that scripture and the tradition formed part of their interpretative horizon. This, perhaps, is another way of saying that by dint of being human (and so, by nature, also being interpreters of their world) on the one hand and practising Christians on the other, all LMC students correlate the insights of faith with lived experience in ways that have implications for Christian living. In other words, they all reflect theologically. This insight finally identified what was wrong with my original question. The heart of the research is not about variance in theological reflection but about the various ways in which LMC students reflect theologically.

4. A Revised Research Question

The shift to ideographic epistemology and hermeneutic phenomenology had now brought the research to a point where it would be possible to draft a revised research question. Rather than seeking a theory in response to a perceived problem, the question needed to apply itself to interpreting students' accounts of the ways in which they correlate faith insights with lived experience as well as giving an account of how the LMC has strengthened such reflective practice. The following question was drafted:

How do LMC students correlate insights from the Christian tradition with lived experience in ways that inform their ministerial practice? How can the course further strengthen such ministerial praxis among its students?

Part 2 – The Pilot Study

1. Arrangements for the Focus Group

At this stage I could have gone straight into some larger scale fieldwork; but before doing that I wanted some evidence that my revised question and the epistemological and methodological assumptions on which it was based would be likely to provide a fruitful foundation for my on-going research into theological reflection on the LMC. This is why I elected to conduct a small scale pilot study to test the water.

For reasons I have already discussed, I decided that a focus group would be the most helpful way of conducting the pilot study. Due to time restraints and out of convenience, a group of nine students who had participated in two recent modules I had taught were invited to participate. Whilst this had the advantage of being an easy group to draw together there were two obvious disadvantages. All but two of the group members were in their first year of training and only one was male. This imbalance was exacerbated because both the more experienced members, one of whom was the only man, had to withdraw from the study at the last moment. I was able to find a student who had completed the LMC programme in 2011 who stepped in to give the perspective of a more experienced student but the group remained all female. This imbalance of gender and experience needed to be taken into account in interpreting the data and will be corrected in my future fieldwork. The names of students have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.

Before the focus group met the participants were asked to give some thought to two questions related to my revised research question. First, they were asked to identify a pastoral encounter, situation or experience they had been involved in prior to commencing the LMC and to be prepared to share in the focus group how they thought, spoke and acted in the situation; and, second, they were asked to think about how they might speak, think or act differently in a similar group now that they had been studying on the programme. When the group met each participant was invited in turn to tell the story of their chosen situation or encounter and the part they played in it. This led onto a more general discussion about what they might do differently in view of their engagement with the LMC and the impact the programme has had on the way they correlate faith and experience. The discussion was recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

2. Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Focus Group

The tentative conclusion I drew from the pilot study was that my revised question and approach would indeed be likely to provide some helpful insights into the ways in which LMC students reflect theologically. The method of hermeneutical phenomenology encouraged me to bracket any pre-understandings I might have had about how the programme had strengthened the ability of the participants to interpret the situations they described. This led me to listen attentively to the participants and to recognize that a recent module on pastoral care in mission and ministry had only been partially successful in helping them to correlate theoretical insights and insights from scripture and the tradition with lived experience. Naomi, for example, says here how she had struggled to get to grips with the module's teaching about the relationship between theory and practice in pastoral care:

For me it – in the middle of the module – it was fine at the beginning and I loved it at the end; it was that middle bit that for me – I got slightly lost about what it was I was supposed to be thinking and doing – how it connected with pastoral ministry. The theory didn't quite connect for me with the practice and it was something about trying to link the two. I'm not quite sure why but I got completely overwhelmed by it.

The method, however, also led me to use my pre-understandings to get a purchase on my interpretation of what the students were saying. Whilst Naomi's comments might have underlined the importance of bracketing my pre-understanding, my sense that when it comes to interpreting pastoral situations the method used is important would prove helpful in interpreting what she and others were saying. In what follows I will draw on summaries of what four of the participants had to say to suggest that their theological reflection would be strengthened further if the LMC programme were to introduce them to a greater variety of methods.

3. Summary of Focus Group Transcripts

a) Charlotte's Story

Charlotte was one of only two students who spoke positively about the module on pastoral care. She described a series of visits she had made to a recently bereaved woman whose grieving and resultant behaviour seemed to be dysfunctional. Charlotte admitted that initially she had approached the situation by, in her own words, pursuing her own 'agenda' and trying to act as a 'life-coach' to the woman. She said, however, that her engagement with the teaching on pastoral care had encouraged her to listen more carefully and to be more attentive to what was going on in the situation.

The module had proposed a particular method of theological reflection. It drew on biblical language about sheep and shepherding to suggest that it is the role of Christian pastoral carers to 'make the voice of the Good Shepherd heard in pastoral situations' (Chandler, 2010, pp. 243-245). From there it offered the pastoral cycle (Green, 2009, pp. 17-27) as a way of integrating theory and practice and correlating the 'components' (Farley, 2000, p. 120) of lived experiences with insights from scripture, tradition and the social sciences.

Drawing on her learning from this module Charlotte described how she had not only begun to listen to what the bereaved woman had to say but also to listen to God in the situation. She also drew on her reading of Roger Walton (2009), one of the LMCs recommended texts, to describe how the programme had changed the way she acted in the situation:

What I learnt through doing that pastoral module when I read that *Reflective Disciple* made a big impact on me because it has taught me to listen and listen to God in pastoral situations and that's been massive for me. Because, going back to the example I used of the lady that I started visiting post-bereavement and all that stuff, I used to go round her house and at first you see I used to feel I had to go often because I obviously had this self-important idea that I was going to sort things out for her. And I was going round with the agenda and going down the list and saying we'll sort this out [...] But through doing that unit and through [...] reading that book about listening to God in pastoral situations and shutting this up (*points to mouth*) and opening these up (*points to ears*) [...] I learnt [...] to try and inhabit her situation; not to judge it but to inhabit it; to get in there where she was at and see things from her perspective and then at the same time try to hear God's voice. And that's what that unit has done for me.

Among the focus group participants, Charlotte was alone in describing how her reading of a text had helped her to interpret and act in the situation. Perhaps she was more ready to do this than others because her professional context meant she already had some expertise in dealing with literary texts. Although she was not the only one in the focus group to say that LMC teaching on the pastoral cycle was helpful, she was alone in articulating how it affected her understanding of what was going on. Those members of the group who found the method inaccessible described how they had correlated faith with lived experience in different ways. It is to those participants that my summary now turns, beginning with Amanda.

b) Amanda's Story

Amanda's story typifies how participants in the larger group fused their framework of faith with a wider framework to interpret a situation. She reported on her dealings with a friend, a married woman who was having an affair with a much younger man. Amanda described how, on the one hand she saw it as her Christian duty to 'make a stand' with regard to her friend's behaviour. She took it for granted that what her friend was doing was wrong but was not so ready to say why. I had hoped that as she told her story she would naturally say the part insights from scripture and the tradition had played in what she said and did in the situation. In the end, however, I resorted to a direct, arguably leading question: 'So why do you think adultery is wrong?' It elicited this response:

Well because it's a commandment, isn't it? Because it's in the Bible; so when I look at the Bible – when I reflect theologically on scripture and I go back to that

and I look at what I should be saying as a Christian I know that what I should be saying is 'Adultery is wrong'.

On the other hand, however, the same framework of faith suggested to her that she should not judge her friend and should be available to support her through what was obviously a very difficult time. Here, she describes the quandary this created:

And I kept swinging from one approach to the other not really knowing what to do and I think I ended up being pretty ineffectual. So my – I was very aware of my Christian duty but I almost thought there was two different sides to my Christian duty: I had to say 'what you're doing is wrong' – you know – 'you've taken vows and should be sticking to them'; but at the same time, I thought who am I to judge another person? I found that quite difficult.

Amanda's reluctance to condemn her friend's behaviour was reinforced because her faith framework was fused into an interpretative horizon with the way in which the situation was understood in the wider village community that provided its context. She described the part played by this influence as follows:

Looking back I never really came down on one side or the other. Really I should have made a stand, I think, and I didn't because other people were saying to me 'these things happen – it's all part of life; people's marriages do break up; what's the problem? You're being very old-fashioned Amanda.' And I let that influence me.

Amanda did suggest some ways in which her studies on the LMC might have led her to approach her friend's situation differently. The security of being part of a cohort of students had enabled her, along with others in the group, to be more self-critical and had given her greater self-confidence in discerning when and when not to challenge others. She also said that the academic rigour of the programme had given her transferable skills that could be used in pastoral encounters. Here she comments on her reaction to having the importance of answering the assignment question impressed on her by a tutor:

And then I started it again; does it answer the question? But I think having to do that on your assignments, then puts it in your mind to do it in your normal practice. Am I just going to talk to them about something I find interesting, or

am I actually [...] gonna help this other person; am I going to listen rather than just tell them what I think about it? It's all connected isn't it?

What Amanda did not do as she related the story was show that she had made any attempt to explore the reasons behind her friend's marital infidelity. This may have been related to her being one of those who found the teaching in the pastoral care module inaccessible. An aim of this teaching was to employ the pastoral cycle to help students to identify the sociological, psychological, economic and other components of pastoral situations. Amanda showed little evidence of a critical conversation between such components and the Christian tradition. To have done so might have been to introduce some novelty to her interpretative horizon that might have taken her beyond the impasse between taking a moral stand and avoiding being judgemental.

If the method outlined in the module had not helped Amanda to engage in a richer conversation between the underlying components of situations and the insights of scripture and tradition, there is an obvious implication for my exploration of how the LMC programme might further strengthen students' reflective practice. There is a need to identify alternative methods in theological reflection that are more accessible to students like Amanda.

c) Diane's Story

A deeper engagement with the components of situations might also have strengthened the theological reflection of other members of the focus group. Diane described her attempts to make meaning out of her own suffering after a motor cycle accident. She related how being in a hospital bed for ten weeks led to a spiritual experience and a deepening of her relationship with God. Friends and family, however, found it hard to see beyond her suffering and questioned how she could continue to maintain her faith in the Christian God in the face of such circumstances. Initially she found herself unable to answer; a state of affairs that she says in the following extract was remedied by her studies on the LMC:

Other people looked at me and said 'How can you carry on believing in a God that makes these things happen to you?' And at the time I found that quite difficult to express; but to me the accident helped me to actually finally understand more about myself and my relationship with God. And coming on the course has helped me to voice my feelings.

Other focus group members agreed with Diane that the LMC had given them enhanced confidence and skills in articulating their interpretation of lived experience. Diane's choice of

words in the above extract, however, is revealing. The programme, she said, had helped her to voice her *feelings* about her renewed understanding of God, something she showed herself able to do in an insightful way. What she did not engage with was what lay behind the questions asked by family and friends. There was no attempt, for example, to correlate theories of theodicy with her lived experience of suffering. The implication, again, is that the LMC programme might strengthen Diane's theological reflection further by facilitating such correlation between faith insights and the tradition.

d) Leanne's Story

Diane was not the only one to stress the importance of 'feelings' in interpreting her situation. Leanne's is the last story from the focus group to be explored in this summary. For her, too, 'feelings' were important. Maybe here, to use Astley's parlance (2002, pp. 55-7), it is possible to detect a difference between the kind of interpretations that might be offered by 'ordinary theologians' and those that tend to be preferred by their 'academic' counterparts. Where the former may look for authenticity through experience, the latter may tend towards explanation and analysis. This leads to a hunch that I intend to follow up as my research progresses; it is, perhaps, this mismatch in the way that practices are seen to be authenticated that leads to the assumption that some people have difficulty when it comes to theological reflection. A further possibility is that the analytical nature of the method outlined in the LMC pastoral module was what made it inaccessible to students who look to experience for authenticity.

Like Diane, Leanne told the focus group about a situation in which she sought to correlate her faith perspective with an experience of suffering but in her case this was the suffering of another person; a friend who suffered a terminal illness with breast cancer. Like Amanda and others, Leanne approached the situation with a lack of confidence but this was exacerbated because her dying friend also happened to be a vicar's wife. Leanne tells here how, whilst her professional expertise as a health care practitioner may have given her the skills to offer practical care, beyond that the perceived ecclesial role of her friend and her husband left her slightly in awe and made it difficult to know how to act in the situation:

It was a very strange situation to find yourself in because, you know, obviously being a vicar and a vicar's wife – you know – you sort of put them up there don't you? Because I feel so small, as a Christian doing it; it just felt very hard because you know like I said you can do the doing bit, you know the hands on stuff to help, but of course I found it difficult then trying to relate that to God and to what the Bible tells us about suffering...

Leanne went on to describe how she interpreted her lack of confidence in terms of not being 'spiritual' enough, describing in the following extract how she felt that the prayers she and her friends had offered had not been accompanied by any authenticating 'feeling':

But I think it really was something that when I look back now I wish I could have been um more um you know could have been more spiritual about it because *N* was very much, very prayerful; she was um an inspiring person; very encouraging [...] And I do remember particularly there were four of us and we laid our hands on her head the night before the brain surgery. But obviously prayer is something you need to be quite strong and it's not just the act it's the actual feeling that goes with it.

Leanne concluded by telling the focus group how the LMC had helped to make her feel more confident about praying in such situations. This was because of her learning on one of the residential weekends when she was introduced to the contemplative tradition in Christian spirituality (Foster, 2004, pp. 34-61). What was left unexamined was precisely how the prayers she offered might have helped the vicar's wife and her family and what the nature of any authenticating 'feelings' might have been. The fact that prayers for physical healing were not answered was not explored and this reality was not brought into any kind of critical conversation with Christian teaching in general or Leanne's learning about contemplative prayer in particular. This suggests a possible avenue for research. What methods in theological reflection might help people such as Leanne to correlate their understanding and practices of prayer and spirituality with lived experience?

Conclusion

My intention in setting up the focus group was to establish whether a shift in epistemological foundation away from nomothetic and towards ideographic knowing would prove to be a helpful move for my research into theological reflection on the LMC. The shift led me away from my attempts to identify a generic explanation for variance in theological reflection and towards a thick description of the practices of LMC students. The identification of hermeneutic phenomenology as a method led me to seek and interpret a rigorous and unbiased description of the reflective practice of a sample of students. From this description some patterns emerged.

The participants in the pilot study were able to relate how they correlated the Christian tradition with lived experience in situations where they took a moral stand, made sense of suffering or prayed for the sick and dying. They were also able to articulate how the LMC programme had helped them to approach such practices with enhanced listening skills and greater confidence.

For a minority of focus group participants, teaching on the LMC about the pastoral cycle had provided a helpful method that enabled them to go a step further and identify the components of the situations they described, bringing them into dialogue with insights from the Christian tradition. For the majority, however, this teaching had proved to be inaccessible. These students struggled to identify the underlying issues of situations and did not bring them into a critical dialogue with their Christian faith framework. They also did not readily bring the Bible or other texts into play.

This has provided a significant avenue for my on-going research. The pastoral cycle is but one of a number of possible methods in theological reflection (Graham, et al., 2005, pp. 11-15). Whilst it may have proved useful for two of the participants, it may be that other approaches will turn out to be more helpful in strengthening the reflective practice of others. I have suggested, for example, that seeking out a method that relates prayer and spirituality to lived experience might facilitate deeper theological reflection for students such as Leanne.

Whilst the pilot study has shown that the change in epistemological approach has moved my research in a helpful direction by paying attention to the ways in which LMC students go about theological reflection, there remain some important caveats. The sample was small and involved mainly first year students all of whom were female. A careful re-reading of the transcripts also led me to doubt whether I had asked the kind of questions that would really help the participants to show that they had correlated the underlying issues involved in their situations with insights from the Christian tradition. To that extent the findings of the focus group must remain provisional.

None of this undermines the revised epistemological framework, however, and if anything it encourages a yet more rigorous approach to be taken in describing and interpreting reflective practice among a larger sample of LMC students. As the project progresses I will continue to use the methods associated with qualitative research to test my findings further. I began this paper by suggesting that LMC students occupy a hinterland between so-called 'ordinary' and so-called 'academic' theologians. My hope is that a renewed, careful description of this hinterland will provide knowledge leading to insightful resonances for both types of theologian.

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Appendix 3 – Professional Doctorate Paper 3

Anglia Ruskin University

**Theological Reflection among Licensed Lay Ministry Students: a Doctoral
Proposal**

Quentin Chandler

SID: 0214247

**A paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for
the degree of Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology**

Submitted 7th November 2012

Contents

	Page No
Abstract.....	196
1. Introduction.....	197
(a) Indicative Title.....	197
(b) Central Research Questions.....	197
(c) Subsidiary Questions.....	197
2. Context	
(a) A Focus on Theological Reflection.....	198
(b) A Backdrop of Uncertainty.....	198
3. An Emerging Conceptual and Methodological Framework	
(a) From a Deductive to an inductive approach to research.....	199
(b) Gadamer and Hermeneutics.....	200
(c) The Pilot Study and the ‘Reading of Data’.....	200
(d) Symbiotic Theological Reflection.....	202
4. Liminality and Theological Reflection	
(a) Triggering Theological Reflection.....	201
(b) Establishing <i>Communitas</i>	202
5. Research Methods	
(a) Exploring with Focus Groups.....	204
(b) Analysing the Focus Group Data.....	206
(c) Exploring Literary Sources.....	207
(d) Exploring Scripture and the Tradition.....	208
(e) Exploring in Interviews.....	208
6. Ethical Implications.....	210
7. Study Plan.....	210
8. Conclusion.....	211
References.....	212

Abstract

This is the third paper to be submitted in partial fulfilment of a professional doctorate in practical theology and represents my research proposal. The proposed project arises out of my context as principal of the Lay Ministry Course (LMC) the Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for licensed lay ministry. In the paper I propose that my research should involve exploring and describing how students on the programme go about theological reflection. I set out how a pilot study led me to see the symbiosis of lived experience and the sources of the Christian tradition as constituting the kind of theological reflection the LMC programme seeks to facilitate. I further describe how my experience of the programme has led me to identify the concept of liminality (the state of being betwixt and between) as being significant for the project. I argue that LMC students occupy a position that is betwixt and between their selection for training and their licensing as ministers and propose that the project should involve exploring the extent to which this liminal status shapes students' theological reflection. I then turn my attention to how I intend to conduct the research, proposing that work in focus groups, interviews and analysis of data provided by students' written work will provide appropriate methods for the project. I conclude with a discussion of some of the ethical issues associated with the proposed research and by providing a provisional timetable for the work.

The length of the paper is 6,561 words.

Introduction

Indicative Title

The first stage of my research for a professional doctorate in practical theology has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my context as principal of the Lay Ministry Course (LMC), the Diocese of Peterborough's training programme for licensed lay ministry (Chandler, 2011; 2012). The purpose of this paper is to develop these reflections into a doctoral proposal. My proposed title for the research project is:

Symbiotic theological reflection: an exploration of interpretive, reflexive skills among students for licensed lay ministry.

(a) Central Research Questions

Symbiotic theological reflection refers here to a skill that the LMC aims to facilitate; that of bringing together lived experience with insights from the Christian tradition in a way that illuminates both and transforms the understanding and/or practice of the reflector. The objective of my research is to ascertain the extent to which the programme achieves this aim. It gives rise to the following research questions:

- 1 In what ways and to what extent does the LMC programme facilitate theological reflection that is an interpretive, reflexive practice involving the symbiosis of lived experience and the sources of the Christian tradition?
- 2 How can the programme further strengthen and develop such theological reflection?

In this proposal I will outline how I arrived at these questions, beginning with a brief sketch of the context from which they arose. I will move on to delineate a methodological and conceptual framework for the project that began to emerge as I progressed through stage 1 of the professional doctorate programme.

Subsidiary Questions

I will then set out how further reflection has led me to propose two subsidiary research questions. These are:

- 1 To what extent does the liminality experienced by LMC students trigger symbiotic theological reflection?
- 2 To what extent does the programme establish a *communitas* that provides an environment in which challenging, reflexive questions can be faced?

Liminality here designates a state of being betwixt and between while *communitas* is a Latin word that describes a community of equals, in this case the kind of learning community the LMC programme seeks to establish.

In charting how I arrived at these subsidiary questions I will complete the outline of my conceptual and methodological framework. My proposal will then move on to outline the methods I intend to employ to answer my research questions before discussing some of the ethical issues involved and giving an intended timetable for the project.

Context

A Focus on Theological Reflection

The LMC programme was inaugurated in 2009. It is part-time, modular and prepares students for three forms of ministry; those of Reader, Lay Pastoral Minister (LPM) and Licensed Evangelist (LE). Training takes place over three years for Readers and two years for LPMs and LEs. The development of skills in theological reflection is central to all three. For Readers these skills are focussed on preaching and liturgical practice; for LPMs the emphasis is on the interpretation of pastoral encounters; and for LEs insights from the tradition are grounded in work with those on the fringes of the ecclesial community and beyond. This means that research into how the students go about theological reflection and how their skills in it might be further developed will serve the purpose of developing my own professional practice as a tutor and principal of the programme. It makes it a particularly appropriate project for a professional doctorate.

The students, their experience of theological reflection and their written work will provide the main sources of my data. To date some seventy-three people have studied on the programme. Last year ten LPMs and four LEs were the first to be licensed by the bishop having completed the programme. A further seven were licensed in September 2012 as were the first ten Readers to have trained on the LMC. In addition the programme has provided an introduction to theological study and vocational development for five people exploring the possibility of ordination.

A Backdrop of Uncertainty

My research will be carried out against the backdrop of some uncertainty about the future of the LMC. When the programme was first conceived, the geography of the diocese was a key factor in its modular design. The Diocese of Peterborough is long and thin with a distance of over sixty miles between its northern and southern extremities. For this reason the LMC was

designed so that modules could be taught at centres in Northampton and either Peterborough or Corby in order to minimize the amount of travel involved for students. This has led to the programme being very labour intensive (tutors often have to teach the same module twice a year at different centres) and it is questionable whether it is sustainable in its current form. It is currently being explored whether web-based learning might provide a more sustainable approach in the long term.

In addition, the Ministry Division of the Church of England has recently entered into an agreement with some of its ecumenical partners and the University of Durham to provide a suite of common academic awards for those in training for a variety of ministries. This national development may also have implications for the LMC. It may be that it will provide more centralized resources at the same time as influencing the shape of training programmes for licensed lay ministry. I expect that research into the LMC programme's effectiveness in facilitating symbiotic theological reflection will be helpful in formulating a response to this changing context.

An Emerging Conceptual and Methodological Framework

From a Deductive to an Inductive Approach to Research

Theological reflection may be defined in a number of ways, each with its own underlying assumptions and methodological approaches. Graham, Walton and Ward (2005) set out seven possible methods, for example, and Thompson (2008, pp. 50-71) suggests three 'ways and means' of going about 'process theological reflection'. My aim here is not to enter into a summary or critique of such understandings and approaches. It is rather to be clear about my own understanding of theological reflection together with its attendant epistemological and methodological assumptions so that I can elucidate precisely what it is that I intend to investigate. My original starting point was a definition offered by Kinast who understands it as an activity that

... begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection; it correlates this experience with the sources of the Christian tradition; and it draws out implications for Christian living (Kinast, 2000, p. 1).

The puzzle that I brought to my research was why it might be that some LMC students seem to be far more adept than others at correlating faith and experience in this way. I soon came to realize, however, that this was the wrong sort of question for an exercise in practical theology. It tended to suggest that there might be an answer somewhere 'out there' to explain the apparent disparity in people's ability to reflect theologically and that this answer might be applicable to

LMC students and generalizable to other contexts. It encouraged me to approach the project deductively, proceeding from theory to the lived experience of the LMC. What was needed was an inductive approach (Schilderman, 2012, pp. 128-9) that would pay closer attention to the unique, non-replicable reality of the programme and its students (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 43).

For this reason I decided to put aside any questions about aptitude for theological reflection and start again, this time with the intention of describing how LMC students go about theological reflection. From there some patterns might emerge to inform my research and my professional practice. These observations may turn out to have resonances for practitioners in similar contexts or to be of interest to those asking questions about the shape of ministry and training in the wider Church of England or its ecumenical partners; but they would certainly not be generalizable to any or all other populations. I propose to work inductively throughout the project, seeking a thick description (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 538-42; Thompson, 2008, pp. 52-3) of theological reflection on the LMC.

Gadamer and Hermeneutics

My decision to move away from questions about aptitude for theological reflection was further informed by the hermeneutical tradition of Gadamer who sees interpretation of experience as being an activity that is common to all human beings (Gadamer, 2004; Thiselton, 2009, pp. 206-27). Accordingly, to be human is to interpret. He sees an essential part in this all-pervasive interpretive process as being played by the prejudices and pre-understandings of the interpreter. Far from being a hindrance to understanding, these prejudices and pre-understandings form part of an interpretive 'horizon' that is necessary for the interpreter to get a 'purchase' on experience (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 278-306; Brown, 2012, p. 114).

For LMC students, Christian faith constitutes a key part of the pre-understanding that enables them to get a purchase on lived experience. The logical inference is that all LMC students correlate lived experience with the resources of the tradition as they interpret their world. This renders theological reflection an activity that is engaged in by all LMC students (and, indeed, most Christian adults). With this new understanding in mind I embarked on a pilot study to begin my description. It led me to reframe my understanding of theological reflection and to the emergence of my research questions.

The Pilot Study and the 'Reading' of Data

The Pilot study consisted of a focus group involving nine LMC students. Ethics permission was obtained from the Anglia Ruskin University and the group met in March 2012. I transcribed the

discussion verbatim and my observations are summarized more fully in one of my earlier papers (Chandler, 2012). For my present purposes it suffices to say that the participants were asked how they had thought and acted in a pastoral encounter or ‘critical incident’ (Chadwick & Tovey, 2003) and that they were all able to describe how, in this context, they had correlated resources from the Christian tradition with lived experience. This chimed with my Gadamerian assumptions and with Kinast’s definition of theological reflection. The students went about their theological reflection, however, in different ways.

It was as I began to think about how I intend to organize the data generated by my on-going research that I came across a way of categorizing these different approaches. Mason (2002, pp. 148-50) distinguishes between three ways of ‘reading’ data, saying that they can be ‘read’ *literally*, *interpretively* or *reflexively*. This led me to recognize that there is an extent to which data has to be ‘read’ literally as attention is paid to what is said in focus groups and interviews or to the content, structure and style of written work. It also led me to be mindful, however, that a purely literal or objective reading is likely to be problematic because data is situated in a social world that is already interpreted and is likely to be shaped by the way the researcher sees it (Mason, 2002, p. 149).

For the most part the way in which the students in the pilot study ‘read’ their critical incidents involved a literal ‘reading’ of sources from scripture or the Christian tradition. So, for example, a situation involving marital infidelity led to a straightforward reading of the Seventh Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount and the liturgy of the marriage service in a way that foreclosed on further discussion about the actions of the people involved. Little or no attempt was made to bring the text into a conversation with the lived experience of the critical incident. This is not to make a value judgement about literal readings; *habitus* approaches to theological practice, for example, involve an instinctive outworking of ingrained, tacitly held traditional sources that are drawn on to ‘read’ lived experience (Astley, 2002, pp. 54-5). The theological reflection that the LMC seeks to facilitate in its students, however, requires them to move beyond such readings.

The Gadamerian underpinnings of my research led me to recognize that the meaning of texts and other data is not straightforward or obvious and that to a great extent they need to be read *interpretively*. That means that as my research continues I propose to draw on my data to construct what I think they mean and what can be inferred from them about theological reflection among LMC students. I also intend to pay attention to the role I play in the generation and interpretation of the data; in other words I propose to read them *reflexively*. Similarly, the LMC seeks to facilitate among its students an interpretive and reflexive ‘reading’

of lived experience and traditional sources. Two of the students involved in the pilot study showed awareness that they were interpreting the critical incidents they described in this way. This in turn led them to recognize the part they themselves played in the process and to a rich conversation between the tradition and lived experience.

Symbiotic Theological Reflection

When it came to these two students, Kinast's definition no longer captured what was going on as they reflected theologically. In particular, the word 'correlation' ceased to be adequate. It suggests a mutual relationship or connection but this now seemed too flat a term. Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, p. 139) suggest that correlation in theological reflection can refer either to an apologetic method that seeks to demonstrate how Christianity fulfils and completes questions arising out of lived experience or to a dialectic method that seeks theological understanding in 'secular' thought-forms. Neither of these reflective methods seemed to do justice to what the students were describing. The fusion between insights from the tradition and lived experience was about more than a straightforward relationship or connection; the theological reflection that was generated was greater than the sum of its parts; it was transformative of the way the students thought about and/or acted in the situation.

This led me to look for a word that conveyed this transformative reflection more helpfully than 'correlation'. 'Synergy' seemed close to capturing what I was observing but 'symbiosis' was better still because it suggested something organic and growing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* symbiosis means 'an interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association, especially to the advantage of both'. What I was observing as the students reflected theologically was precisely encapsulated by this definition. As lived experience was brought into critical dialogue with insights from the Christian tradition and *vice versa*, students' understanding of both was growing and being strengthened and enhanced and this was informing their practice.

My proposal is that my research will involve exploring how and to what extent the LMC programme facilitates movement from theological reflection as mere correlation towards theological reflection as symbiosis. This gives rise to the indicative title and research questions in section 1a and 1b of my introduction to this proposal.

Liminality and Theological Reflection

Triggering Theological Reflection

My experience of the LMC leads me to suspect that an important concept in answering these central questions will be that of *liminality*. The concept gives rise to the two subsidiary

questions in section 1c. The first concerns exploring the extent to which participation in the programme may be seen to trigger symbiotic theological reflection. The word ‘liminality’ is derived from the Latin *limen* meaning ‘threshold’ and refers to an ambiguous state of social being in which ‘liminars’ are ‘neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification’ (Turner, 1974, p. 232). LMC students find themselves betwixt and between their selection for training and their licensing and future ministry. Students have commented in the focus group and elsewhere that they find this liminal space a bewildering and even threatening place to be as their introduction to critical study of scripture and the tradition brings to the surface and challenges tacitly held beliefs.

This sense of bewilderment need not be seen as problematic but rather as providing a ‘jolt’ (Killen & de Beer, 1994, p. 16) or ‘trigger’ (Cameron, Reader and Slater, 2012, pp. 16-21) that leads to theological reflection. It may be understood as being characteristic of liminal space. In evolutionary science the hinterland between environments is where adaptation often occurs and new species are born. Similarly, in the field of practical theology Cameron, Reader and Slater argue (2012, p. 11) that liminal space can be ‘revelatory of new insight’. They refer to ‘blurred encounters’ in describing situations in which boundaries are crossed as judgements are made about appropriate courses of action. This, they argue, triggers ‘theological reflection for human flourishing’. My suspicion is that the LMC leads its students into a series of such ‘blurred encounters’ or liminal situations in which boundaries are crossed and fruitful, symbiotic theological reflection is triggered. My research will involve investigating the validity of this suspicion.

Establishing Communitas

The second subsidiary question arising out of the concept of liminality concerns the extent to which the programme provides the appropriate learning community and support structures for difficult questions to be faced so that symbiotic theological reflection can be fostered. The term liminality was deployed in the early twentieth century by Van Gennep to denote a transitional stage in so-called primitive societies accompanying rites of passage such as marriage or coming-of-age. He saw initiates as going through a three-stage process involving separation from the community followed by a liminal stage during which they would receive instruction from elders. A final stage would involve a ritual return after which the initiates would take up their new role in the community (La Sure, 2005; Turner, 1997, pp. 94-5). LMC students can be shown to mirror this process. For the most part they continue to be members of their congregations for the duration but they are separated from the wider church in order to participate in the programme. This puts them under the instruction of the course tutors for two

to three years before the process is completed by the ritual of a licensing service in the cathedral after which they take up their new status in their congregations.

Van Gennep's concept of liminality would later be developed by Turner whose work suggests that the liminal stage can provide the right kind of supportive environment in which difficult questions and challenges can be faced. Turner posited two major models of human interrelatedness (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2007, pp. 133-6). For him, the social structure provides a differentiated and hierarchical community. In contrast he sees *communitas* as 'an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated [...] community of equals who submit to the authority of the ritual elders' (Turner, 1997, p. 96). He sees *communitas* as emerging recognisably during the liminal period when liminars are 'divested of the outward attributes of structural position' and 'reduced to an equality' with their fellows (Turner, 1974, p. 232).

Again this resonates with what happens on the LMC programme. The ecclesial hierarchy could be seen to provide a clearly structured and differentiated community. Students are taken out of this structure and encouraged to give up such positions as being churchwardens or PCC members. At the same time they find themselves part of an emerging *communitas* of equals under the guidance of the staff and tutors. There are questions to be asked in my research about the extent to which the programme provides the kind of community of equals that might provide a secure place in which difficult and challenging questions about the relationship between scripture, tradition and lived experience can be faced in order to facilitate theological reflection.

Research Methods

Exploring with Focus Groups

I propose to answer these questions by embarking on an empirically based project in qualitative research. I will begin by building on the pilot study and conducting semi-structured interviews with students in four further focus groups. There are two reasons why I propose to continue with focus groups rather than one-to-one interviews. The first is that it will enable me to work with a larger sample of LMC students than would be possible if I were to start by conducting individual interviews. A desirable approach might have been to conduct a longitudinal study focussing on one group of students for three to four years from the start of their training through to their first year of ministry and assess how they develop skills in theological reflection as they progress through the programme. In the time available, however, it will be impossible to conduct such a study and for this reason my intention is carry out a cross-sectional survey (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 272-3) to take 'snapshots' of groups of students at different points on the programme during the same narrow point in time (from November 2012 to January 2013).

I intend to do this by forming one focus group for each year group currently studying on the programme. The first will consist of the entire cohort of current first year students (of whom there are only ten). The second will be made up of those second year students (fifteen in total) who did not take part in the pilot study. This will mean that during the course of the project (including the pilot) I will have involved one hundred per cent of current first and second year students in focus groups. In the participant consent forms I sent out prior to the pilot study I asked for and gained permission for the group's contributions to be used in the second stage of my research. Things are more complicated for the third years because LPMs and LEs are licensed after two years so there are only five trainee Readers remaining in the cohort. My intention is to invite the seven LPMs and LEs who were licensed in September 2012 to return to participate in this focus group alongside the Readers-in-training.

The second reason that I intend to initiate the next phase of my research by working with focus groups is related to the issue of power dynamics. I referred to this issue in my earlier paper (Chandler, 2012). It is part of my role as LMC principal to make a final recommendation to the bishop as to whether individual students should be licensed. This means that students might be inclined to tell me what they think I want to hear rather than being honest about how the programme has strengthened (or failed to strengthen) their theological reflection. I recognize that some participants might find themselves out on a limb from their peers and so be reluctant to share their experiences in a group, but on balance my assumption is that the majority are more likely to be truthful when supported by other students than they would be in a one-to-one situation. My experience in the pilot study has also led me to recognize the importance of paying particular attention to drawing out the opinions of more reticent participants in group situations.

As was the case in the pilot study, I intend to ask the focus group participants to prepare for the discussion by identifying a 'critical incident' such as a pastoral encounter or experience and being prepared to share the difference their learning on the LMC programme might have made to the way they thought or acted in the situation. My intention is for this to lead into a more general discussion of the way they relate insights from scripture and tradition to lived experience and how this might have been influenced by the liminal experience of participation in the programme.

I intend to invite my seven colleagues on the LMC staff team to participate in a fourth focus group in an attempt to understand theological reflection on the programme from the point of view of its tutors. I will ask them to tell me about situations in which they have seen students

correlate faith and experience, categorizing the data they provide in a similar way to that provided by the students. From this I will seek to establish whether the tutors see a similar pattern of symbiotic theological reflection emerging.

When I conducted the pilot study I recorded the discussions on a Dictaphone and transcribed them using a transcription machine with a foot pedal. Whilst this had the advantage of causing me to pay close attention to what had been said, it was extremely time-consuming; Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 539) suggest that it may take as much as five or six hours to transcribe an hour's worth of data and my experience is that this is a conservative estimate. I only reproduced a tiny proportion of the transcripts in my paper (Chandler, 2012) so I came to the conclusion that the time had not been well spent. For this reason I have purchased a digital voice recorder. This will provide high quality recordings of the focus group discussions and interviews and I will be able to keep these for the duration of the project in password protected computer files. I will be able to encode the recordings and retrieve data quickly and easily, only transcribing significant sections that I will include in the card indexing system I propose to create and/or in the final thesis.

Analysing the Focus Group Data

Once I have gathered the data from the focus groups I propose to employ the method of hermeneutic phenomenology (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 105-16; Chandler, 2012, pp.5-7) to analyse them. That is to say I intend to work towards an objective, unbiased, thick description of students' theological reflection, at the same time as recognizing and exploring the part my own pre-judgements have to play in interpreting the material.

To do this I will create a cross-sectional indexing system (Mason, 2002, pp. 159-66). I will begin by coding the recordings according to the point the participants have reached on the LMC programme. I will then seek to categorise contributions according to how I understand students to have 'read' sources from the tradition, differentiating between those who have done so literally and those who have engaged in a symbiosis of tradition and lived experience. I will also identify points in the recordings at which students show that they have taken transformative action or enabled others to do so. I will encode places in the recordings at which students describe how the programme has triggered theological reflection or provided a *communitas* in which theological reflection can take place.

I expect the indexing system to allow me to cross-reference between categories, enabling me, for example, to assess the extent to which students are more likely to be able to engage in symbiotic theological reflection as they progress through the programme. I have considered the

possibility that this part of the research might be facilitated by the use of a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) package such as N-Vivo (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 542-6; Mason, 2002, pp. 151-2; Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 176-7). Whilst I remain open to this possibility I suspect that it may take me some time to master the software and I feel more confident about creating a card index system. I will keep this decision under review and discuss it with my supervisors throughout the project.

I recognize that the categorization of students' contributions in the focus groups will be subjective and that there is a danger that I will end up seeing only what I expect to see. This leads me to see my categories as being provisional and I intend to keep a journal giving a reflexive account of the decisions I make throughout the process and to explore these with my supervisors, making adjustments as appropriate. I will also use the recordings of the focus group made up of tutors to keep a check on the way I interpret the data provided by students.

Exploring Literary Sources

During the same period that I conduct the focus groups, I intend to use some of the written sources produced by the students to generate data. The deployment of triangulation in qualitative research, that is, the use of more than one method, is a way of exploring from more than one perspective and thus providing a fuller description of the phenomenon being observed (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 195-7; Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 50-1). LMC students are required to write an assignment at the end of each module as well as a series of reflective pieces as part of the core foundational module. All this work is kept on a database at the diocesan education office to which I have access. I propose to use this written material in my research in order to explore my central question from an alternative perspective.

A problem in using this approach will be the sheer bulk of written material involved, much of which will not be relevant to my questions about theological reflection. For this reason I intend to focus my attention on the assignments written at the end of the module on pastoral care in mission and ministry as this piece of work specifically asks students to attend to the interplay between lived experience and sources from the Christian tradition. The design of the LMC will prove to be helpful with regard to this aspect of my research. Because of the modular, localized design of the programme, students study the module at different points during their training. This will make it possible to explore the extent to which those who are further on in their training have developed enhanced skills in symbiotic theological reflection.

Once again I intend to categorize and index this material in the same way as the data provided in the focus groups, identifying texts that show where students have correlated faith insights with

experience in literal, interpretive or reflexive ways, looking for examples where some aspect of the LMC has triggered symbiotic theological reflection and identifying at which point on the programme students completed the assignment.

Exploring Scripture and the Tradition

Throughout the research I intend to pay attention to the part that my own faith framework and that of the students has to play in generating data. In particular I intend to pay attention to the extent to which liminality is implicit within an Anglican expression of the Christian tradition, how this liminality might have formed my own and students' approaches to theological reflection, and how a deeper exploration of scripture and the Anglican tradition on the LMC programme might strengthen their reflective practice.

Liminality is a theme that can be seen to run throughout scripture. The wilderness experience of the Exodus, for example, sees the Israelites betwixt and between slavery in Egypt and freedom in the Promised Land and it is understood by the Old Testament writers as being the creative context in which the Mosaic Law originates; and the Babylonian exile is another fertile period in the history of the Hebrew canon. In the New Testament Jesus' own wilderness experience is seen as being formative of his ministerial understanding in the temptation narratives (Matthew 4.1-11; Luke 4.1-13); Cameron, Reader and Slater, meanwhile, see such passages as Jesus' resurrection appearance on the Road to Emmaus (2012, pp. 9-15; Luke 24.13-35) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (pp. 21-2; Luke 10.29-37) as being biblical examples of liminal or 'blurred' encounters; the Jesus of John's gospel sees his disciples as being in a position of liminality in relation to the world; and Pauline theology sees the early church as being in a liminal status as it awaits the parousia.

These Biblical examples of liminality may be interesting in themselves but their relevance to my research project lies in the extent to which reflection on them may help LMC students and others to see the experience of liminality as being constitutive of Christian living and therefore as being a creative place from which to begin their theological reflection. Similarly, the classical Anglican understanding of the *Via Media* sees it as occupying a blurred space betwixt and between Catholic and Reformed Christianity. In the focus group discussions and my exploration of students' written work my intention is to explore how this Anglican identity, together with the biblical material, is brought into a symbiosis with students' lived experience.

Exploring in Interviews

Through interpretation of my work with focus groups, the analysis of students' written work and reflection on liminality and resources from the Christian tradition I expect that I will be able to

respond by drawing out some implications for my practice as principal of the LMC. At this point I intend to take stock of the research and the direction it will take thereafter must remain tentative for now because I intend to remain open-minded as to how the project might unfold.

My suspicion, however, is that the data generated in the focus groups may lead me to identify some individuals whose stories about theological reflection on the LMC will be worth pursuing further. This would lead me to conduct unstructured interviews with these people in order to gain a deeper insight into the extent to which the programme has formed and strengthened their skills in theological reflection. My hope is that these interviews would lead me to complete my description of the reflective practice of LMC students and its implications for my professional practice.

Ethical Implications

There are some ethical implications arising out of the way I intend to conduct my research. I will circulate a participant information sheet and consent form to all current and past LMC students in order to seek permission to use their written work. A separate information sheet and consent form will be sent to focus group participants and interviewees. The programme administrator has agreed to help with this aspect of the project. I will give assurances in the information sheet that I will make every effort to preserve anonymity and that pseudonyms will be used. It will also be spelt out in the information that participation is voluntary and that refusal to take part will not prejudice students' progression towards licensing. I will stress that no reference to participation (or lack thereof) in the focus group will appear in any written reports on the students and it will not be mentioned in any conversations I might have with the bishop or other diocesan officers.

Participants will be given the option of withdrawing from the research at any point should they wish to do so, again without prejudicing their potential licensing. Should any decide to withdraw or be forced to do so because they move away or become ill, I will explore with my supervisors the extent to which this might be seen to compromise the integrity of the project. I am heartened by the fact that those who took part in the pilot study did so enthusiastically and that nobody expressed any desire to withdraw from the study.

I continue to have two areas of concern about the ethics of the project, however.

In the pilot study I ran into difficulties because students were asked to report on pastoral situations or encounters involving third parties from whom it was not possible to obtain ethics permission. Due to the relatively small number of students involved in the LMC and the fact that many of them come from small villages the possibility of the participants and therefore the

third parties being identifiable is high. For this reason I found it necessary not only to use pseudonyms but also to be very careful about what information I divulged in my text (Chandler, 2012). This will continue to be the case for my on-going work with focus groups and for my use of students' written work. I intend to take the utmost care to preserve anonymity when I report what the students tell me about encounters involving third parties.

I have already alluded to my second area of concern. My position as LMC principal places me in an ideal position to gain access to the programme and I have the full support of the bishop and of my colleagues. The same position, however, could also be seen as problematic with regard to the research. Students may not feel that they are at liberty to refuse to participate in the project and may take some convincing that their contributions will not influence their progression towards licensing. I will be mindful of these power dynamics throughout and I intend to begin each focus group session or interview by making it clear that what people say will not be prejudicial to their progress through the programme. I will seek to gain further ethics permission from the Anglia Ruskin University before I commence the next phase of the project.

Study Plan

I have sabbatical leave of absence from my professional role from the middle of December 2012 until Easter 2013. This will provide me with the opportunity to spend over three months working full-time on the research project. This puts me in a position to provide the following timetable for my work:

November 2012	Complete and submit Paper Three. Complete and Submit ethics proposal to Anglia Ruskin University; discuss methods of data analysis and potential use of CAQDAS software with supervisors; begin work on a short paper on liminality in scripture and tradition to inform this aspect of focus group discussions; recruit membership of focus groups.
November and early December 2012	Begin analysis of students' written work; Conduct focus groups and begin analysis.
Late December 2012 and January 2013	Complete analysis of students' written work; complete analysis of focus group discussions; bring the second round of

(sabbatical begins)	research to a conclusion.
February 2013	Complete analysis of data gathered to date; write a reflection on research so far to provide a starting point for the next round of research; identify interviewees for the next round of research; arrange and begin conducting interviews.
March 2013 (end of sabbatical leave)	Complete, transcribe and analyse interviews; begin write-up of main thesis.
Spring to summer 2013	Write up thesis
Autumn to winter 2013	Write up thesis
Spring to Summer 2014	Complete write-up and submit thesis

Conclusion

This paper has set out how my research project will be a theological reflection on my experience of the ways in which students on the LMC programme go about theological reflection. My work to date has led me to identify the symbiosis of lived experience with the resources of the Christian tradition as being definitive of the kind of theological reflection the programme seeks to facilitate. I have identified the liminality experienced by LMC students as being a possible trigger for such reflection. As my research continues I intend to explore this possibility and build on it to arrive at a fuller description of students' theological reflection and the ways in which it might be further strengthened by their experience on the programme. My hope is that this project will lead me to be better placed to facilitate the symbiotic theological reflection of licensed lay ministers in the Diocese of Peterborough.

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Appendix 4 – Participant Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS (STUDENTS)

You are being invited to take part in my research into theological reflection among students on the Peterborough Lay Ministry Course. The purpose of this is to explore the ways in which LMC students draw on insights from scripture and tradition in their daily lives and in their ministerial practice. I hope that the study will improve my professional practice and also strengthen teaching on the LMC. I am going to carry out some discussions with students from the course in focus groups and I would like you to be one of the participants. In the focus group I will be asking you a few questions about the way you use the Bible and Christian tradition in your daily life and ministry.

Before you come to the group I would like you to think about a pastoral encounter, situation or experience you were involved in prior to starting the Lay Ministry Course. This might be a discussion you had with someone about an ethical issue; it might be when you offered help or guidance to someone or provided them with a listening ear; it could be some issue you faced personally or an issue that was faced by your church. Think about what you said and did in the encounter, situation or experience and be prepared to share it in the focus group. Also be prepared to share how you might speak, think or act in a similar encounter, situation or experience now you have been studying on the Lay Ministry Course.

I intend to record the discussions in the focus groups and transcribe them. I am the only person who will have access to the recordings and transcripts and I will respect confidentiality. I will draw on the transcripts to write my doctoral thesis which I will be more than happy for you to read.

It may be that I will ask to interview you on a one-to-one basis at a later stage in my research. If that is the case I will contact you nearer the time.

It is important to stress that what you say in the focus group or later interviews will have no bearing on your progress on the LMC or on any decision about you being licensed at the end of the course. I need you to say what you really think rather than what you

think I might want to hear! Where appropriate I will change the names of interviewees to protect anonymity. I will need you to fill in the attached consent form. Please note that you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time you choose and a form enabling you to do so is also attached to this information sheet. Refusal to take part or withdrawal from the project will not affect your progress through the course or your potential licensing.

Appendix 5 - Participant Consent Form

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the project: *Conversations beyond the threshold*

Main investigator and contact details: Revd. Quentin Chandler – Bouverie Court – 6 The Lakes – Bedford Road - Northampton – NN4 7YD

T 01604 887042 (work); 01536 725111 (home)

M 07909542060

E quentin.chandler@peterborough-diocese.org.uk

W www.peterborough-diocese.org.uk

Members of the research team: Revd Quentin Chandler

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I give permission for my written work in assignments, projects and tasks to be used as data for the research.
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
4. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
5. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
6. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the University⁵ processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me*

***Note to researchers: please amend or add to this clause as necessary to ensure that it conforms with the relevant data protection legislation in your country**

⁵ “The University” includes Anglia Ruskin University and its partner colleges

Name of participant

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the main investigator named above.

Title of Project: Ministerial Praxis among LMC Students

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed: _____ Date: _____

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Appendix 6 – Table of participants

A total of thirty students participated in the main study; together with the six tutors interviewed these participants provided the data on which the findings summarised in Chapters 6 and 7 were based. A further six students and one participant who had already been licensed had been interviewed in the pilot study.

<u>First year focus group</u>		
<i>Interviewed at Bouverie Court, Northampton, initially on 10th November 2012 and then as the final, validating focus group on May 17th, 2014</i>		
<i>Pseudonym of participant</i>	<i>Ministry for which the participant was in training</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Celia	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Chris	Licensed Evangelist	Chris was unable to continue during the initial focus group so I conducted an individual interview with him at his home on 21 st January, 2013
David	Lay Pastoral Minister	David left the programme at the end of the first year and did not participate in the final focus group
Ena	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Gina	Licensed Evangelist	In her second year, Gina changed track and was training for Reader ministry by the time of the final focus group
Greta	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Jacqui	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Janet	Licensed Evangelist	
Rob	Reader	
Stuart	Licensed Evangelist	Stuart left the programme at the end of the first year and did not participate in the final focus group

<u>First year focus group (A)</u>		
<i>Interviewed at Bishop Woodford House, Ely on 3rd November, 2012</i>		
<i>Pseudonym of participant</i>	<i>Ministry for which the participant was in training</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Anna	Licensed Evangelist	
Elaine	Reader	
Graham	Reader	
Joan	Reader	
Martin	Lay Pastoral Minister	Martin was unable to attend the focus group so I conducted an individual interview with him at my home on 17 th January, 2013
Matt	Reader	
Pauline	Reader	
Phil	Reader	

First year focus group (B)*Interviewed at Bishop Woodford House, Ely on 3rd November, 2012*

<i>Pseudonym of participant</i>	<i>Ministry for which the participant was in training</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Donna	Reader	
Jeff	Reader	
Keith	Reader	
Lorette	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Norah	Licensed Evangelist	
Paul	Reader	
Sian	Lay Pastoral Minister	

Third year focus group*Interviewed at Bouverie Court, Northampton on 10th January 2013*

<i>Pseudonym of participant</i>	<i>Ministry for which the participant was in training</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Alec	Reader	
Gavin	Reader	
Harriet	Reader	
Justin	Reader	
Linda	Reader	

Tutor interviews*Pseudonyms have not been given in order to preserve anonymity*

<i>Role on the Lay Ministry Course</i>	<i>Date and location on interview</i>
Diocesan Director of Training	19 th December 2012; Bouverie Court, Northampton
LMC Vice Principal	14 th January 2013; Bouverie Court, Northampton
LMC Director of Studies	12 th February, 2013; at the participant's home
Coordinator of Reader training	10 th January 2013; Bouverie Court, Northampton
Coordinator of Lay Pastoral Minister training	26 th February 2013; at the participant's home
Coordinator of Licensed Evangelist training	6 th March 2013; at the participant's home

The pilot study focus group*Interviewed at the researcher's home on 21st March 2012**All the participants in the pilot were first years apart from Dianne*

<i>Pseudonym of participant</i>	<i>Ministry for which the participant was in training</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Ailsa	Lay Pastoral Minister	
Amanda	Reader	
Charlotte	Reader	
Dianne	Lay Pastoral Minister	Dianne had completed her training and was licensed as a Lay Pastoral Minister in September, 2011
Julie	Reader	
Leanne	Reader	
Naomi	Licensed Evangelist	